

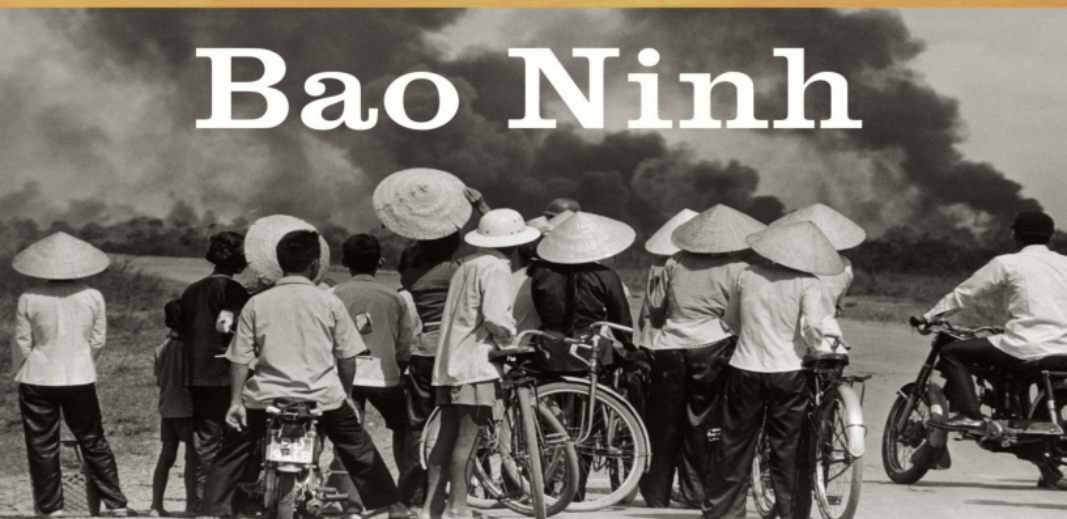
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The Sorrow of War

A NOVEL OF NORTH VIETNAM

Bao Ninh



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The Sorrow of War

Bao Ninh was born in Hanoi in 1952. During the Vietnam War he served with the Glorious 27th Youth Brigade. Of the five hundred who went to war with the brigade in 1969, he is one of ten who survived. A huge bestseller in Vietnam, *The Sorrow of War* won *The Independent* Foreign Fiction Award for 1994. It is Bao Ninh's first novel.

The Sorrow of War

A Novel of North Vietnam

Bao Ninh

Translated from the Vietnamese by Phan Thanh Hao

Edited by Frank Palmos

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The Sorrow of War

On the banks of the Ya Crong Poco river, on the northern flank of the B3 battlefield in the Central Highlands, the Missing In Action Remains-Gathering Team awaits the dry season of 1975.

The mountains and jungles are water-soaked and dull. Wet trees. Quiet jungles. All day and all night the water streams. A sea of greenish vapor over the jungle's carpet of rotting leaves.

September and October drag by, then November passes, but still the weather is unpredictable and the night rains are relentless. Sunny days but rainy nights.

Even into early December, weeks after the end of the normal rainy season, the jungles this year are still as muddy as all hell. They are forgotten by peace, damaged or impassable, all the tracks disappearing bit by bit, day by day, into the embrace of the coarse undergrowth and wild grasses.

Traveling in such conditions is brutally tough. To get from Crocodile Lake east of the Sa Thay river, across District 67 to the crossroads of Cross Hill on the west bank of the Ya Crong Poco—a mere fifty kilometers—the powerful Russian truck has to lumber along all day. And still they fall short of their destination.

Not until after dusk does the MIA Zil truck reach the Jungle of Screaming Souls, where they park beside a wide creek clogged with rotting branches.

The driver stays in the cab and goes straight to sleep. Kien climbs wearily into the rear of the truck to sleep alone in a hammock strung high from cab to tailgate. At midnight the rains start again, this time a smooth drizzle, falling silently.

The old tarpaulin covering the truck is torn, full of holes, letting the water drip, drip, drip through onto the plastic sheets covering the remains of soldiers laid out in rows below Kien's hammock.

The humid atmosphere condenses, its long moist, chilly fingers sliding in and around the hammock where Kien lies shivering, half-awake, half-asleep, as though drifting along on a stream. He is floating, sadly, endlessly, sometimes as if on a truck driving silently, robotlike, somnambulant through the lonely jungle tracks. The stream moans, a desperate complaint mixing with distant faint jungle sounds, like an echo from another world. The eerie sounds come from somewhere in a remote past, arriving softly like featherweight leaves falling on the grass of times long, long ago.

Kien knows the area well. It was here, at the end of the dry season of 1969, that his 27th Battalion was surrounded and almost totally wiped out. Ten men survived from the Lost Battalion after fierce, horrible, barbarous fighting.

That was the dry season when the sun burned harshly, the wind blew fiercely, and the enemy sent napalm spraying through the jungle and a sea of fire enveloped them, spreading like the fires of hell. Troops in the fragmented companies tried to regroup, only to be blown out of their shelters again as they went mad, became disoriented, and threw themselves into nets of bullets, dying in the flaming inferno. Above them the helicopters flew at treetop height and shot them almost one by one, the blood spreading out, spraying from their backs, flowing like red mud.

The diamond-shaped grass clearing was piled high with bodies killed by helicopter gunships. Broken bodies, bodies blown apart, bodies vaporized.

No jungle grew again in this clearing. No grass. No plants.

“Better to die than surrender, my brothers! Better to die!” the battalion commander yelled insanely; waving his pistol in front of Kien he blew his own brains out through his ear. Kien screamed soundlessly in his throat at the sight, as the Americans attacked with submachine guns, sending bullets buzzing like deadly bees around him. Then Kien lowered his machine gun, grasped his side, and fell, rolling slowly down the bank of a shallow stream, hot blood trailing down the slope after him.

In the days that followed, crows and eagles darkened the sky. After the Americans withdrew, the rainy season came, flooding the jungle floor, turning the battlefield into a marsh whose surface water turned rust-colored from the blood. Bloating human corpses, floating alongside the bodies of incinerated jungle animals, mixed with branches and trunks cut down by artillery, all drifting in a stinking marsh. When the flood receded everything dried in the heat of the sun into thick mud and stinking rotting meat. And down the bank and along the stream Kien dragged himself, bleeding from the mouth and from his body wound. The blood was cold and sticky, like blood from a corpse. Snakes and centipedes crawled over him, and he felt death’s hand on him. After that battle no one mentioned the 27th Battalion any more, though numerous souls of ghosts and devils were born in that deadly defeat. They were still loose, wandering in every corner and bush in the jungle, drifting along the stream, refusing to depart for the Other World.

From then on it was called the Jungle of Screaming Souls. Just hearing the name whispered was enough to send chills down the spine. Perhaps the screaming souls gathered together on special festival days as members of the Lost Battalion, lining up in the little diamond-shaped clearing, checking their ranks and numbers. The sobbing whispers were heard deep in the jungle at night, the howls carried on the wind. Perhaps they really were the voices of

the wandering souls of dead soldiers.

Kien was told that passing this area at night one could hear birds crying like human beings. They never flew, they only cried among the branches. And nowhere else in these Central Highlands could one find bamboo shoots of such a horrible color, with infected weals like bleeding pieces of meat. As for the fireflies, they were huge. Some said they'd seen firefly lights rise before them as big as a steel helmet—some said bigger than helmets.

Here, when it is dark, trees and plants moan in awful harmony. When the ghostly music begins it unhinges the soul and the entire wood looks the same no matter where you are standing. Not a place for the timid. Living here one could go mad or be frightened to death. Which was why in the rainy season of 1974, when the regiment was sent back to this area, Kien and his scout squad established an altar and prayed before it in secret, honoring and recalling the wandering souls from the 27th Battalion still in the Jungle of Screaming Souls.

Sparkling incense sticks glowed night and day at the altar from that day forward.

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There were civilian souls loose in the wood, too. Quite near to where the Zil truck parked on this rainy night there was once a tiny trail leading to Leprosy Village. Long ago, when the 3rd Regiment arrived, the village had been empty. Disease and successive famines had erased all life.

Still, it seemed the naked, warped, and torn souls had continued to gather, emitting a stink that penetrated the imagination. The regiment sprayed gasoline and set the village alight to cleanse it, but after the fire the soldiers were still terrified and none of them would go near the place again for fear of ghosts and lepers.

One day "Lofty" Thinh from Squad 1 courageously went into the village and there, in the ashes, shot a big orang-utan. He called in three others to help him drag it back to the squad huts. But, oh God, when it was killed and skinned the animal looked like a fat woman with ulcerous skin, the eyes, half-white, half-grey, still rolling. The entire squad was horrified and ran away screaming, leaving all their kit behind. No one in today's regiment ever believed the story, yet it was true. Kien and his colleagues had buried her, making a little headstone for the grave.

But none escaped her vengeful, omnipresent soul. Lofty Thinh was soon killed. Gradually the entire platoon was wiped out. Only Kien remained.

That had happened during the rainy season. Before marching to the South Wing to attack Buon Me Thuot, Kien's regiment had been based on this very spot for nearly two months. The landscape was much the same and the roads over which they passed had not become overgrown.

At that time the scout platoon had built its huts on the bank of this same stream by which they were now parked, but farther along, where the stream hits the foot of the mountain, divides, then continues along as two separate streams. Now, perhaps, at that branching of the stream their old grass huts remained. Thatched roofs, side by side, near the rushes by the water.

The area had been used then to house front-line soldiers called back to the rear for political indoctrination. Politics continuously. Politics in the morning, politics in the afternoon, politics again in the evening. “We won, the enemy lost. The enemy will surely lose. The North had a good harvest, a bumper harvest. The people will rise up and welcome you. Those who don’t just lack awareness. The world is divided into three camps.” More politics. Still, the scouts were treated lightly, not being pressured as much as others to attend the indoctrination sessions.

They had plenty of time to relax and enjoy themselves before returning to the battlefields. They hunted, set traps, caught fish, and played cards.

In his entire life Kien had never developed such a passion for cards as he developed here. They played all the time. At dark, straight after dinner, the game started. In the warm air which smelled of sweat and mosquito repellant the gamblers gathered enthusiastically, concentrating on their cards. The kitty was usually stinking “Compatriot” cigarettes, made from wild leaves. Or if the stakes were higher, it would be snuff or pieces of flint or the roots of *rosa canina* plants, which were smoked like marijuana. Or dried food, or photos: photos of women of all kinds, foreign or Vietnamese, ugly or beautiful, or anyone’s sweetheart. Any photo was valid currency. When the kitty was gone they used to get lampblack and paint mustaches on each other. Some played, others watched, joyfully, noisily, sometimes all through the night. It seemed a period of happiness and calm. An easy, carefree time.

They were really happy days because for most of that rainy season they didn’t have to fight. The entire platoon of thirteen was safe. Even Lofty Thinh spent a happy month here before being killed. Can hadn’t yet deserted. His friends Vinh, “Big” Thinh, Cu, Oanh, and “Elephant” Tac were all still alive. Now only the torn, dirty set of cards, fingerprinted by the dead ones, remained.

Nine, Ten, Jack!

Lofty, Big Thinh, and Can!

Queen, King, Ace!

Cu, Oanh, and Tac!

Sometimes in his dreams these cards still appear. He shouts their names and plays solitaire. "Hearts, diamonds, spades..." They had bastardized the regimental marching song and made it a humorous cardplayers' song:

*We'll all be jokers in the pack,
Just go harder in attack.
Dealing's fun, so hurry back,
Enjoy the game, avoid the flak.*

But one by one the cardplayers at their fateful table were taken away. The cards were last used when the platoon was down to just four soldiers. Tu, Thanh, Van, and Kien.

That was in the early dawn, half an hour before the barrage opened the campaign against Saigon. On the other side of an overgrown field was the Cu Chi defense line. The Saigon defense forces then started returning fire with artillery and machine guns and they registered some lucky hits. In the trenches and in shelters the infantry were trying to enjoy last moments of sleep. But for Kien's scouts, who were going to lead the attack as the advance guard, it was going a bit too fast. They were spooked by their cards, not at all liking how the hands fell as they played the game called "Advance."

"Slow down a bit," Kien suggested. "If we leave this game unfinished Heaven will grant favors, keeping us alive to return and finish the game. So, slow down and we'll survive this battle and continue the game later."

"You're cunning," said Thanh, grinning. "But Heaven's not stupid. You can't cheat Him. If you play only half the game The Man Up There will send for all four of us and we'll torment each other."

Tu said, "Why bother to send all four? Send me with the cards. That'll do it. I'll play poker, or tell fortunes from cards for the devils in charge of the oil urns. That would be fun."

The dew evaporated quickly. Signal flares flew into the air. The infantry noisily came to life and began to move out. Armored cars motored to the front line, their tracks tearing the earth, the roar of their engines reverberating in the morning breeze.

"Stop, then!" Kien threw the cards down, adding petulantly, "I just wanted to slow down for good luck, but all of you rushed the game to the end."

"Hey there!" Van slapped his thigh happily. "I didn't know until now just how much I enjoyed playing cards. I'll have to learn to play better. If I die, remember to throw a deck of cards on my grave."

"We have only one deck and Van wants it for himself. Selfish bastard!" Thanh shouted back as he moved out. Before an hour was up Van was burned

alive in a T54 tank, his body turned to ash. No grave or tomb for them to throw the cards onto.

Thanh died near the Bong bridge, also burned in a tank together with the tank crew. A big, white-hot steel coffin.

Only Tu had fought, together with Kien, to Gate 5 of Saigon's Tan Son Nhat airport. Then Tu was killed. It was the morning of 30 April, with just three hours to go before the war ended.

Late in the night of 29 April and into the 30th when the two of them met for the last time at the airport, Tu had taken the deck of cards from his knapsack and given it to Kien. "I'll go in this fight. You keep them. If you live on, gamble with life. Deuces, treys, and fours all carry the sacred spirit of our whole platoon. We'll bring you permanent luck."

Kien sinks into reminiscence.

Whose soul is calling whom as he swings gently and silently in his hammock over the rows of dead soldiers?

Howls from somewhere in the deep jungle echo along the cold edges of the Jungle of Screaming Souls. Lonely, wandering noises. Whose soul is calling whom this night?

To one who has just returned the mountains still look the same. The forest looks the same. The stream and the river also look the same. One year is not a long time. No, it is the war that is the difference. Then it was war, now it is peace. Two different ages, two worlds, yet written on the same page of life. That's the difference.

Kien recalls: At the time of our first stay here it was late August. Between the jungle and the forest along this stream, *rosa canina* blossomed in the rain, whitened everywhere, its perfume filling the air, especially at night. The perfume vapor permeated our sleep, fueling erotic, obsessional dreams, and when we awoke the perfume had evaporated but we were left with a feeling of smoldering passion, both painful and ecstatic. It took us months to discover that our nightly passion-frenzied dreams were caused by the *canina* perfume. Those diabolical flowers! Kien had seen them in the jungles along the western ridge of the Ngoc Linh mountains and even deep inside Cambodia around Ta Ret, but nowhere did they grow the way they did here, with such powerful scent.

The *canina* here grows close to creek banks, within reach of the mountain carp, which nibble at the roots, so when caught their taste is exquisite but instantly intoxicating. The local people say *canina* thrives in graveyards or any area carrying the scent of death. A blood-loving flower. It smells so sweet that this is hard for us to believe.

Later it was Kien's scout platoon, taking a break in some idle moments, who decided to try drying the *canina*, slicing the flowers and roots, then mixing them with tobacco as a smoke. After just a few puffs they felt themselves lifted, quietly floating like a wisp of smoke itself floating on the

wind. The tasty *canina* had many wondrous attributes. They could decide what they'd like to dream about, or even blend the dreams, like preparing a wonderful cocktail. With *canina* one smoked to forget the daily hell of the soldier's life, smoked to forget hunger and suffering. Also, to forget death. And totally, but totally, to forget tomorrow.

Smoking *rosa canina* Kien would immerse himself in a world of mythical and wonderful dreams which in ordinary moments his soul could never penetrate. In these luxurious dreams the imagined air was so clean, the sky so high, the clouds and sunshine so beautiful, approaching the perfection of his childhood dreams. And in those dreams the beautiful sky would project pictures of his own lovely Hanoi. The West Lake on a summer afternoon, the scarlet flame trees around the lake. Once in his dream-picture he had felt the waves lapping the side of his tiny sampan and looking up he had seen Phuong, youthful, innocently beautiful, her hair flying in the Hanoi breeze.

The soldiers each had their own way of smoking *canina* and ridding themselves of their shared harsh realities. For Cu, cassava alcohol or *rosa canina* conjured up images of returning home. Cu could relate the scenes vividly, making them sound so joyful that tears fell from everyone's eyes as he unfolded the scene in soft words. Vinh dreamed only of women, describing his imagined and planned love affairs with youthful enthusiasm. As the affairs dragged on the women became more voluptuous and the affairs more complicated, the descriptions more erotic and explicit. As for Elephant Tac, he dreamed mainly of food. He spoke of long tables laden with wonderful and exotic dishes and of sitting down to savor the moments, morsel by morsel, dish by dish.

The lethargy brought on by *rosa canina* spread from Kien's scout-platoon huts through the entire regiment. It wasn't long before the political commissar ordered the units to stop using *rosa canina*, declaring it a banned substance.

The commissar then ordered troops to track down all the plants and cut all the blooms, then uproot all the trees throughout the Screaming Souls area to ensure they'd grow no more.

Along with the gambling and smoking of *canina* went all sorts of rumors and prophecies. Perhaps because the soldiers in their hallucinations had seen too many hairy monsters with wings and mammals with reptilian tails, or imagined they smelled the stench of their own blood. They imagined the monstrous animals plunging about bleeding in the dark caves and hollows under the base of Ascension Pass on the other side of the valley from the jungle.

Many said they saw groups of headless black American soldiers carrying lanterns aloft, walking through in Indian file. Others paled in terror as horrible, primitive wild calls echoed inside their skulls in the rainy, dewy mornings, thinking they were the howls of pain from the last group of orang-utans said to have lived in the Central Highlands in former times.

The rumors and the predictions were all seen as warnings of an approaching calamity, horrible and bloody, and those who leaned towards mysticism or believed in horoscopes secretly confided these fears to their friends. Soon there sprang up tiny altars in each squad hut and tent, altars to the comrades-in-arms already fallen. And in the teamaking smoke of the incense soldiers bowed and prayed, whispering in prayer:

*Suffering in life, pain in death,
The common fate of us soldiers.
We pray the sacred souls will bless us,
That we may overcome enemy fire
And avenge our lost comrades...*

The rain had kept pounding, day after day. The fighting seemed blanketed by the immense dull sea of rain; if one stared hard and long into the dark, grey, wet-season sky, or listened to the rain falling on the canvas canopies, one thought only of war and fighting, fighting and war.

The rain brought sadness, monotony, and starvation. In the whole Central Highlands, the immense, endless landscape was covered with a deadly silence or isolated, sporadic gunfire. The life of the B3 infantrymen after the Paris Agreement was a series of long, suffering days, followed by months of retreating and months of counterattacking, withdrawal, then counterattack. Victory after victory, withdrawal after withdrawal. The path of war seemed endless, desperate, and leading nowhere.

At the end of the wet season the echoes of cannon fire could be heard a hundred kilometers away, a harbinger of a poor dry season over Con Roc, Mang Den, and Mang But.

That September the NVA forces attacked Kontum township's defense lines. The firing was so loud that it shook the earth as if every square meter would rise in a groundswell and burst. In the 3rd Regiment, hiding in the Screaming Souls Jungle, the soldiers waited in fear, hoping they would not be ordered in as support forces, to hurl themselves into the arena to almost certain death.

Some of those waiting found they were hearing a musical air in their heads, the sound of guitars rising and falling with the sounds of the Kontum carnage. Soldiers of that year 1974 sang:

*Oh, this is war without end,
War without end.
Tomorrow or today,*

Today or tomorrow.

Tell me my fate,

When will I die...

Late in the afternoon of Can's escape, that wet, boring autumn afternoon, Kien was sitting by the stream fishing. The drizzle was relentless, the day lifeless and gloomy. The stream was swollen, its waters turbulent and loud, as if it wished to wash the banks away. But where Kien sat fishing there was a silent eddy around bare tree roots, exposed where flood waters had bitten deep.

Kien nestled in his jute raincoat, hugging his knees, staring blankly into the rolling stream, thinking of nothing, wanting nothing. Now that the *rosa canina* had all gone there was nothing for his soul to grab hold of, so it wandered, meandering freely. Every day Kien would sit for hours by the stream, motionless, letting its sorrowful whispering carry him along.

That autumn was sad, prolonged by rain. Orders came for food rations to be sharply reduced. Hungry, suffering successive bouts of malaria, the troops became anemic and their bodies broke out in ulcers, showing through worn and torn clothing. They looked like lepers, not heroic forward scouts. Their faces looked moss-grown, hatched and sorrowful, without hope. It was a stinking life.

To buoy himself up, Kien sometimes tried to concentrate on uplifting memories. But no matter how hard he tried to revive the scenes, they wouldn't stay. It was hopeless. His whole life from the very beginning, from childhood to the army, seemed detached and apart from him, floating in a void.

Since being recruited he'd been nicknamed "Sorrowful Spirit" and this now suited his image and personality, just as the rain and gloom fitted the character of the Jungle of Screaming Souls.

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Kien waited for death, calmly recognizing that it would be ugly and inelegant. The thought of his expected end brought a sense of irony.

Just the week before, in a battle with Saigon commandos on the other side of the mountain, Kien had truly made fun of death. When the southern ARVN had faced his own northern NVA troops both sides had quickly scattered, rushing to take cover behind tree trunks and then firing blindly. But Kien had calmly walked forward. The enemy had fired continuously from behind a tree ahead of him but Kien hadn't even bothered to duck. He walked on lazily, seemingly oblivious to the fire. One southern soldier behind a tree fired hastily and the full magazine of thirty rounds from his AK exploded loudly around Kien, but he had walked on unharmed. Kien had not returned fire even when

just a few steps from his prey, as though he wanted to give his enemy a chance to survive, to give him more time to change magazines, or time to take sure aim and kill him.

But in the face of Kien's audacity and cool the man had lost courage; trembling, he dropped his machine gun.

"Shit!" Kien spat out in disgust, then pulled the trigger from close range, snapping the ARVN soldier away from the tree, then shredding him.

"Ma...aaaaaa!" the dying man screamed. "Aaaa..."

Kien shuddered and jumped closer as bullets poured from all sides towards him. He hadn't cared, standing firm and firing down into the man's hot, agonized body in its death throes. Blood gushed out onto Kien's trousers. Walking on, leaving blood-red footprints in the grass, he slowly approached two other commandos hiding and shooting at him, his machine gun tucked carelessly under his arm, his shirt open. He was unconcerned and coldly indifferent, showing no fear, no anger. Just lethargy and depression.

The enemy backed away and dispersed in retreat.

Despite that imprudent, risky action Kien was invited on return to the military personnel section and told he was on the list of officers selected to attend a long-term training course at the Infantry Institute near Hanoi. The order would soon come down from the divisional commander and Kien was to travel back up north.

"The fighting is endless. No one knows when it will stop," the hoarse, gloomy personnel officer told Kien. "We must keep our best seeds, otherwise all will be destroyed. After a lost harvest, even when starving, the best seeds must be kept for the next crop. When you finish your course and return to us, your present officers will all be gone and the regiment with them. The war will go on without you."

Kien remained silent. A few years earlier he would have been proud and happy, but not now. He did not want to go north to do the course, and felt certain he would never join them, or become a seed for successive war harvests. He just wanted to be safe, to die quietly, sharing the fate of an insect or an ant in the war. He would be happy to die with the regular troops, those very soldiers who had created an almost invincible fighting force because of their peasant nature, by volunteering to sacrifice their lives. They had simple, gentle, ethical outlooks on life. It was clearly those same friendly, simple peasant fighters who were the ones ready to bear the catastrophic consequences of this war, yet they never had a say in deciding the course of the war.

Someone was coming up to him from behind, but Kien didn't turn. The person came closer, then silently sat down behind Kien as he fished on the edge of the stream. At that late hour the bamboo forest on the other bank seemed to make the dusk thicken. The brief rainy day faded away quickly.

"Fishing?" the person asked.

“Obviously,” Kien replied coldly. It was Can, chief of Squad 2. A small thin boy, nicknamed “Rattling” Can.

“What’s your bait?”

“Worms.” Kien added: “I thought you had a fever. What’re you doing here in the wet?”

“Caught anything?”

“No. Just killing time.”

Kien mumbled. He hated any confidences, any sharing of personal problems. Hell, if everyone in the regiment came to him with personal problems after those horrendous firefights he’d feel like throwing himself over the waterfall. He knew Can was going to unload some personal problems on him.

“It’s raining heavily in the North,” Can droned on in his gloomy, dispirited voice. “The radio says it’s never rained as hard. My home district must be flooded by now.”

Kien just cleared his throat. More rain was falling. The air was getting colder and now it was quite dark.

“You’re about to go north, I hear.”

“What if I am?”

“Just asking. Congratulations.”

“Congratulations? Congratulations?”

“Please. I’m not jealous, Kien. I’m sincere. I know you don’t like me but can’t you understand a little of what I mean? Accept what Heaven gives you. You’ve survived down here and now you’ll go north and continue to survive. You’ve suffered a lot. You were from an intellectual family, so it’s not right for you to die anyway. Just go, and let events unfold here. We feel pleasant envy for you. You deserve it.”

“I’m not going anywhere to make others happy. I know you’re scared of being killed, but you have to overcome your fear by yourself. You can’t place that responsibility on others’ shoulders.”

Can seemed to ignore the taunt.

“As for me, I’ve always longed for the opportunity to get into an officers’ training course. Truly, that was my dream. I’m younger than you. I was top of the class at school. I’ve tried to discipline myself, to fulfill all my duties. No disobedience, no gambling, no alcohol, no dope, no women, no swearing. And for what? All for nothing! I’m not jealous, just depressed.”

Kien felt uneasy about what was coming. He feared it, yet he expected it.

Can continued, “I haven’t lived yet and I want very much to live.”

Kien remained silent.

“For just one week in the North I’m prepared to lose everything. Everything.”

“So I’ll tell personnel to put your name down instead of mine,” said Kien sarcastically. “Don’t moan! Please, go back to your hut and lie down.”

“Don’t patronize me! I’m telling the truth, not trying to change things. I can look after myself. I’m not afraid of dying, but this killing and shooting just goes on forever. I’m dying inside, bit by bit. Every night I have the same dream, of me being dead. My soul swims out of my corpse and turns into a vampire going off to suck human blood. Remember the Playcan fighting in 1972? Remember the pile of corpses in the men’s quarters? We were up to our ankles in blood, splashing through blood. I used to do anything to avoid stabbing with bayonets or bashing skulls in with my rifle butt, but now I’ve got used to it. And to think that as a child I wanted to take orders and go into a seminary.”

Kien turned and looked curiously at Can. You occasionally found such traumatized misfits in the army. Their chaotic minds, their troubled speech, revealed how cruelly they were twisted and tortured by war. They collapsed both spiritually and physically. But it was curious that after fighting alongside Can for so long Kien had never heard him go on like this. He had seen Can only as a trusty farmer who’d gradually adjusted to the hell of the battlefield.

“You’re an experienced front-line soldier, but you’re starting to whine and moan. That will make you even more miserable, Can. You’d better transfer out of the scout group. We’re the first to go into the fight.”

Can continued his gloomy confessions as though he had not heard a word. “I used to ask myself why I’m down here while my old suffering mother is at home, helpless, day and night crying for her distant son. When I joined up my village was flooded and it was hard for Mother even to get by. Who was left to help her? My brother was already in the forces. I could have been exempted as the only son left but the village chief wouldn’t agree. We have so many of those damned idiots up there in the North enjoying the profits of war, but it’s the sons of peasants who have to leave home, leaving a helpless old mother exposed to hardships. So, Kien...”

Suddenly Can burst into tears, burying his face in his knees, his shoulders heaving and trembling, his thin back wet and shivering.

Kien stood up, picked up his fishing rod, and looked down, frowning, at Can. “You’ve been reading too many enemy pamphlets. If someone reported you to the upper levels you’d be a goner. Are you going to desert?”

Can remained sitting, his head on his knees. His voice came low, mixing with sounds from the stream and the rain. “Yes. I’m going. I know you’re a real friend. You’ll understand. Say good-bye to the guys for me.”

“You’re nuts, Can. First, you’ve no right to escape. Second, you can’t. You’ll be caught and brought back. Courtmartialed. Shot. You’ll be worse off than now. Listen to me. Calm down! I won’t rat on you.”

“Too late. I’ve already hidden my bag in the jungle.”

“I’m not letting you desert. Go back to the huts. Try to hang on a bit longer.

The war has to end sooner or later.”

“No. I’m off. Win or lose, sooner or later, that means nothing to me. My life is fading fast, and I still have to see my mother once more, and my village. You won’t stop me? What for? Why would you?”

“Listen, Can, leaving like this is suicidal. And shameful.”

“Suicidal? Killing myself? I’ve killed so often it won’t mean a thing if I kill myself. As for the shame...” Can stood up slowly, looking into Kien’s eyes. “In all my time as a soldier I’ve yet to see anything honorable.

“Back home I might be even more humiliated. They won’t let me live. Even so, these nights all I dream of is my mother calling me. Perhaps my brother is dead already and she’s ill and suffering. I can’t wait any longer. It’s you, not me, who’s been chosen for the officers’ course and being sent back. Me, I’ll just have to find my own way home. I hope my friends take pity on me.

“I won’t get caught, not if the scouts don’t chase me. And that’s you, Kien, you’re in charge, you’re the one who can guarantee my safety. Let me go.”

Can continued softly, “When this is all over, well, you know my village in the Binh Luc district, Ha Nam province. Drop in when you get a chance.”

In the darkness Can grasped Kien’s wrist with his cold, thin hand. Kien slowly pushed the hand away and turned his back without saying a word, leaving Can by the stream.

Nearing his hut Kien seemed to awaken and change his mind. He dropped his fishing gear and turned back, running to the stream, calling “Can, Caaaaaan!”

He called again, “Caaan, wait.”

He rushed back through the heavy rain along the dark path to the edge of the stream. Can was gone. In the tiny clearing Kien felt imprisoned by the rain and the thick bamboo jungle wall on the other side of the stream.

The restricted visibility compressed the space. The only movement was the stream, which gurgled on.

Kien stood there staring, then burst into tears, the rain washing over his face as the tears gushed out.

Desertion was rife throughout the regiment at that time, as though soldiers were being vomited out, emptying the insides of whole platoons. The authorities seemed unable to prevent the desertions. But the commanding officers issued specific orders for Can to be traced. They feared he would desert to the enemy and betray the secrets and the battle plans of the entire regiment.

After many days splashing around on their search the military police finally found Can the deserter. He’d only made it to a small dead-end track between hills, two hours from the huts. He still had months to travel, so many obstacles between him and home in Binh Luc.

In late September, just before the regiment's departure from the Jungle of Screaming Souls, the men got mail from their families, their only delivery for the wet season. Kien's scout platoon got just one letter. It was for Can, from his mother.

The whole hamlet shares my joy at having received your letter and I write back immediately with the hope that the kind military post officers will take pity on me and deliver it as quickly as possible to you. I might already have died, but thanks to your letter I now continue to live and hope, my dear son.

Oh, my son, since receiving word of your brother's death from his unit, then having his commemoration ceremony in the village and getting the Patriotic Certificate, my dear son, I have worked night and day in the ricefield, ploughing land and transplanting. And I pray always to Heaven and the ancestors, your late father and brother, to bless you in that distant battlefield, praying you and your comrades will return safely...

Kien read and reread the letter. His hands trembled, tears blurred his eyes. Can was no more. The military police had found his rotten corpse. Only his skeleton was complete, like that of a frog thrown into a mud patch. Crows had pecked away Can's face; his mouth was full of mud and rotting leaves.

"That damned turncoat, he really stank," said the military policeman who had buried Can.

His eye-sockets were hollow, like trenches. In that short time moss and slime had already grown over him. The MP gagged, spitting at the memory.

No one spoke of Can again. No one bothered to find out why he had died, whether he was killed or had just exhausted himself in the jungle, or whether he'd committed suicide. No one accused him, either.

The name, age, and image of someone who'd been every bit as brave under fire as his comrades, who had set a fine example, suddenly disappeared without trace.

Except within the mind of Kien. Can's image haunted him every night, returning during the night to whisper to him by his hammock, repeating the final, gloomy lines he'd spoken by the stream. The whisper would turn into a suffocating gasp, like the sound of water blocking the throat of a drowning man.

"...my soul swims out of my corpse..."

Kien recalled Can's voice. And each time Kien knelt in prayer before the platoon's altar to the war martyrs, he would whisper a word for Can's soul, the soul of a comrade who had died in humiliation, uncared for and misunderstood, even by Kien.

In the past months of the wet season Kien had been posted to the MIA team charged with gathering the remains of the dead from the worst battlefields. He had crossed almost all the northern sector of the Central Highlands, returning to the sites of innumerable battles. The MIA team had uncovered a vast family of forgotten members of their regiment, dead under the mantle of the warm jungle. The fallen soldiers shared one destiny; no longer were there honorable or disgraced soldiers, heroic or cowardly, worthy or worthless. Now they were merely names and remains.

For some of the other dead, not even that. Some had been totally vaporized, or blasted into such small pieces that their remains had long since been liquidized into mud.

After some final touches with the shovel their graves would be done, their remains laid out. Then with their final breath their souls were released, flying upwards, free. The uprush of so many souls penetrated Kien's mind, ate into his consciousness, becoming a dark shadow overhanging his own soul. Over a long period, over many, many graves, the souls of the beloved dead silently and gloomily dragged the sorrow of war into his life.

Tonight, back at the camp, how strange that it is a night which is perhaps the most mystical of the hundreds of dark nights in his life, with Can's soul whispering to him. And now his whole fighting life parades before him, with troops of dead soldiers met on the battlefields returning through a dim arch in an endless dream. The echoes of the past days and months seem like rumbles of distant thunder, paining then numbing his own turbulent soul.

Near dawn Kien suddenly shivers and half awakens to a piercing, horrible, sorrowful howl, flying up from the cliffs like an echo. Kien moves to get up but then stops and flops back into the hammock, closing his eyes, still listening to the howl.

That howl, the howl first heard in this damned Screaming Souls Jungle right by this same stream in the rainy season last year, the last rainy season of the war. The howl from the valley on the other side of the mountain, echoing down to us. Some said it was mountain ghosts, but Kien knew it was love's lament.

—

At the time, right here in the sad wet jungle, Kien's B3 scout platoon had lived a moment of love which was strange and fascinating, fueled by a passion both wanton and unique, born of a magical meeting.

Kien had unfortunately not been included in this ambience of love. He recalled his unit had arrived and chosen to build huts at the foot of this very mountain. After the first two nights had passed everyone sensed something unusual was happening to the platoon. Kien had done more than sense that mysterious atmosphere. He had listened to it, and had seen vague figures flitting by. On the third night, a rainy August night, Kien, fitful after three

days of fever, was distressed and could not sleep. Uneasy, just before dawn, he put on his raincoat and with machine gun at the ready went to check the huts. The forest floor was muddy and slippery and lightning sparked the air, lighting the jungle every few moments.

Kien slipped around, groping his way through the rain, his machine gun swinging. Approaching the Squad 1 hut, Kien stopped. Laughter? Yes, peals of laughter. But who would be laughing like that in this sorry platoon? And imitating a girl's voice? It sounded ghostly. Kien approached, looking inside. It was dark, but there was no sound of snoring. Just a heavy silence.

Kien was wary: "Who laughed in there?"

"Why, Kien?" Thanh's voice. Alert.

"Who? Maybe an angel," said another.

"Don't piss around. Someone laughed. I'm not that feverish, you baboon."

"So come in, platoon commander. Check for yourself."

Kien was confused. Shit! Was there another ghost in this Screaming Souls Jungle? Kien dropped the flap, then left. Still, the laughter had seemed clear, sharp, genuine. A girl's laughter, not a ghost's. He was not imagining things.

Walking slowly back, he sensed a movement and stopped, stiffening to stay still and alert. He could hear his own heart come almost to a standstill. In the reflection of the stream he saw a lovely young girl. Her midriff was bare, her skin shone like the light dancing on the water, her hair, long and flowing, hung down on her thighs. She walked slowly out of his vision, leaving her reflection dancing among the reeds along the bank.

Kien stared after her into the jungle, then shook himself free of the vision and shouted out, "Stop! Who's there?" He stepped forward with his hand on the trigger. "Code Five!" he called. No answer.

The rain, the thunder, and the lightning seemed to halt abruptly.

"Stop! I'll shoot!" Kien shouted angrily.

"It's me—Thin!"

"What?"

"It's me. My turn on duty," answered Lofty Thin clearly. "What's wrong?"

"Who's been in there with you?"

"No one."

"Didn't you see anyone?"

"No. What's up?"

Kien swore through his teeth. Just then the lightning and thunder flared up again. Kien stared into the swaying trees, looked again at the swirling stream, then back at Thin.

Thin stood before him, looking innocent. He wore shorts, his bare midriff glistening in the rain.

Kien groaned softly, then trudged back slowly to his tent. He threw himself back into his hammock, overcome by a sense of self-pity and impending doom.

What had he seen? Ghost or girl?

The next morning the matter was not mentioned. Neither Thanh nor Thinh said a word, but Kien felt they and the others shared a secret, while pretending nothing unusual was happening. It was the first time he had felt cut off from his friends.

Kien slowly discarded fears that he had imagined things. Something was happening, something strange. No more beautiful ghost-girls slipped by the huts near the stream. But he sensed other mysterious movements.

At midnight shadows slipped silently from the hammocks. Gently creeping to the hut doors, making signals to the night guards, they disappeared in single file into the dark jungle. The shadows slipped quietly into the stream and headed, in teeming rain, towards the great dark mountain.

Night after night these shadows moved around, until one night Kien too awoke. He lay still, feigning sleep, listening. At first he heard the whispers, then movements from hammocks, then bare feet stepping into mud. Then muted conversation with the guards. Someone slipped over. Muffled laughter.

Some nights they were shadows from his own hut: the next night from another hut: once from the hammocks near him. They were going out every night, returning hours later, just before dawn. He could hear them, out of breath, muddled and shivering from the drizzle and cold air.

After a few nights Kien began caring for them, worrying for the welfare of these shadows. He would lie awake until every one of them had returned. When the last one had returned he would hear a long, mournful call from the base of the mountain, like a call of farewell. At the return of the last shadow Kien would sigh with relief and drop into a slumber.

Not the entire platoon of thirteen were involved. Three regulars, he was certain, made the dangerous journey at night to the dark mountain through a wild, gloomy valley. He now recalled there had been a prosperous farm there by a waterfall, before the war had spread inland.

The farmhouse had been abandoned, then commandeered by the district military officers as their headquarters, then abandoned again many years ago. There had been three very young girls from the original farming family. It dawned on him that the girls, who would now be in their late teens, had returned home despite the farm's vulnerability.

Kien felt he now knew what was happening and that he understood their feelings. Which is why, as a commander, instead of stopping the undisciplined and dangerous liaisons, he did nothing. He recalled the standing orders from the political commissar: "It is necessary to readjust, rectify, and re-establish the rules, the morals and behavior of your men, when there are breaches." Of course that would have meant pulling the soldiers out, snapping them out of

their romantic spell. Kien's heart would never allow him to truly discipline those boys. It begged him to keep silent and sympathize with the young lovers. What else could they do? They were powerless against the frenzied forces of young love which now controlled their bodies.

At the time Kien felt old. Only he and Can were over twenty. All the others were still teenagers, still boys.

It was then that the honeyed dreams began, and in his sleep he saw his beautiful girl from Hanoi appear before him. During those rainy nights she would come to him from the back door of his memory, stepping lightly like a sprite. His body would shiver, then tremble, starved and thirsty with desire, wanting to savor the heightened sensations of smooth body contact. "We two may die as virgins, our love is so pure. We ache for each other, unable to be together," Phuong would say, causing their seventeen-year-old hearts nearly to break.

In his dream he knew that he was dreaming and he would writhe, trying to change the images, trying to get away from the pain and desolation he suffered from knowing it was all a dream.

When he awoke he heard the young men's footsteps from far away. Now he had no need to await their return. He could tell long before. In their hut, along with the gentle perfume of dope, there was now a new fragrance, distinctly soft, tender and ethereal, which lingered vaguely in the wind.

Kien thought back to the source of his own love, when he had been young. That was now hard to imagine, hard to remember a time when his whole personality and character had been intact, a time before the cruelty and the destruction of war had warped his soul. A time when he had been deeply in love, passionate, aching with desire, hilariously frivolous and lighthearted, or quickly depressed by love and suffering. Or blushing in embarrassment. When he too was worthy of being a lover and in love, as his troops were now.

But war was a world with no home, no roof, no comforts. A miserable journey, of endless drifting. War was a world without real men, without real women, without feeling.

War was also a world without romance. He couldn't avoid the drain on his soul, the ruin his young men were escaping from as they set about squeezing the last remaining drops of love from their nightly adventures. Tomorrow, they might be dead. We might all be dead.

But the love he knew had been within him seemed now to have drained away. He despaired that he could never again share the frivolities and elations of ordinary love.

Closing his eyes, looking back, Kien remembered the pain of those weeks. Those young girls and the boys of his platoon were all dead now. A constant fear for them had wrenched his heart. True, it was war, and the times were abnormal. The great issues, the important tasks of fighting and their sacred duties, had become the most important matters in life. Whereas the tiny

issues, those filigree-fine joys and sorrows of human destiny, like the boys' dalliance with the three farm girls, seemed less important. They were such rare occurrences they were considered by some as a bad omen, as though happiness must necessarily call down its own form of retribution in war.

It was indeed true; those small acts of love were an omen of terrible events to come.

Kien recalled the scene as if it were only yesterday. He was standing there in the pelting rain in the wet grassy yard of the small farmhouse in the isolated valley at the base of a huge mountain where every night his young men had secretly met their new lovers.

His face, clothes, and hair were all sopping wet. The submachine gun was about to slip from his shoulder. Around the farmhouse the huts and storage areas from the district headquarters days seemed to send off vapor from the teeming rain as the drops bounced off their roofs. The sky gradually lightened and a few rays broke through, although some light rain persisted.

"Ho Biaaaaaa!" Lofty Thinh had started calling.

Kien had simply gone along with the search. After Thinh's calls the other scouts scattered around the farm all shouting the girls' names: "Ho Biaaaaa! May, Maaaay! Thom, Thoom!"

There was no reply. From the high waterfall by the cliff between the farm and the foot of the mountain a huge fountain of white water arose, rumbling and foaming, sounding like perpetual thunder.

But no one replied.

The other sounds were from the rain. Water running off roofs, dripping into pools. Kien went inside. It was a lovely three-roomed house with a bamboo roof, covered with perfumed wild lily. The furniture was in good condition, and tidy. A full set of rattan chairs and table, a flower pot, tea and teacups. An opened book. Beds, pillows, blankets. Mirrors and combs.

At the back, clothes were hanging on the line, washing that should have been brought in by then.

The larders were well stocked with paddy, rice, and cassava. The smell of dried mushrooms, honey, and stores of other fragrant foods and spices filled the little kitchen. All seemed in perfect order. The kitchen table had been laid neatly, as though a full dinner had been prepared but the family had been called away. Bowls of dried fish, eggplants, rice, had been placed in the center of the table and covered with insect-proof netting. For each person there were chopsticks, bowls, salt, pepper, and small side plates. The main rice pot was still on the stove, and below it the charcoal and ash glowed dimly, still warm.

Kien and his men stepped out back, through peanut plants, eggplant, thyme, and oregano. They walked cautiously down the yard to banana trees and marrows. Beyond this vegetable garden a simple low wooden gate opened onto a tiny narrow path leading to a stream which ran into the main river a

little way down. They stood there looking over the stream and up into the dim shadows of the mountain under which the little farmhouse stood.

Though it rained day and night, the farm girls had used water from the stream, wisely saving their well-water for the dry season. Kien approached the well. It seemed in good order; the lid fitted snugly and around its base a gutter had been dug, to drain away muddy water during heavy rains. The silence was unnerving.

Kien left the others and on a hunch turned towards the stream and noted the girls' tiny bathhouse built over the water, almost totally hidden from view behind bamboo. The narrow track from well to bathhouse was graveled, weed-free.

Kien approached not by the path but circuitously, by stepping quietly into the water and wading upstream.

The door of the bathhouse was open. He kneeled, unslinging his machine gun. He was certain someone was in there...

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That had been so long ago, yet now it was still vividly clear in his mind. The bathhouse door hadn't been opened. It had been ripped off its hinges and thrown aside onto the bank. Inside there were two buckets, part-full, a dipper, a pair of rubber sandals, and soap. A thin, worn housecoat and an embroidered towel hung on a tiny line. A piece of muddied clothing lay by the wall near a green canvas raincoat.

Something on the smooth rocks caught his eye. It was a torn white bra. In the dim light it looked like a strange large flower with smooth, soft petals. On one petal there was a trace of blood.

Kien shivered as though twine had been wrapped tightly around his heart. Then he pictured several greenish, ghostly enemy forms passing silently under the jungle canopy, quietly arriving at the jungle's edge to find the farm, then entering...finding three young girls. One girl had been in the bedroom, another in the kitchen near the table, the third at the bathhouse. There had been no time to react. No cries. No shots. No escape.

"The commandos! The commandos, they did it," someone howled.

"Oh, Kien," said Thinh in a whisper, his voice hoarse and trembling.

Beyond them the bamboo branches scratched eerily against the bamboo walls. Kien sighed, tightening his lips.

"Did you hear anything this morning?" he asked.

"No. Nothing," they replied.

Kien tried to put the picture together. So, what had happened? These young men had been here with the girls last night, enjoying themselves.

This was 1974, not the dark times of 1968 and 1969, the worst years of the

war. This was now a day's walk to the front line. Yet this morning the young lovers in the platoon had sensed something wrong. They had persuaded Kien to take a look. Kien now agreed their hunch had been right.

"How do you know they're commandos?" Kien asked, aware that whoever the visitors had been, they were still alive, and not far away.

"We found a Rubi cigarette-end. And footprints," Thinh said.

"What made you sense something was wrong this morning? You were happy enough when you came back," Kien said, letting them know he had known all along of their nocturnal visits.

"Nothing specific. We suddenly felt unbearably anxious, that's all."

"Now you tell me! Did any of you go back looking for them this morning?"

"Yes. But we found no trace."

"You missed this," said Kien, pointing to the bloodstained bra.

Thinh stepped out front, slowly kneeling down. His AK rifle dropped from his shoulders, clattering on the rocks.

"It's Ho Bia's! This is Ho Bia's bra!" he whispered, raising the bra to his lips. "Oh, darling, where did they take you? Why? You were so innocent! Why would they hurt you? What can we do?"

Thinh sobbed and moaned, uttering urgent prayers in a despairing voice.

Later, many years later, while watching a pantomime where an artist bent over, writhing his body in agonized desperation, by magical association Kien recalled the moments when Thinh had similarly crouched in sobbing despair, praying for Ho Bia.

The audience around him in the theater had seen Kien suddenly sit bolt upright, remembering the war scene clearly. His attention on the pantomime faded as the sharp detail of the tragic love story of his men and the three farm girls unfolded in his mind. He drifted off into a reverie as he dreamed of that day, blind to the pantomime before him.

How deeply moved he was, and how he trembled at the joy and the pain the memories brought. He wanted to etch into his heart these memories, and wondered how he could have forgotten this tragedy for so many years.

It was almost dark that same day before they found the commandos' hiding-place. They had not killed the three girls on their own farm, but had chosen to take them down the valley, away from the farm. The rain had erased their tracks and it was by total chance that Kien's platoon had discovered the seven commandos at the foot of a hill.

They had ambushed the commandos, killing three of them in the first attack and capturing the remaining four at gunpoint.

Lofty Thinh, one of the lovers, was killed in close fighting, getting a bullet through his heart. No time for tears or for vengeance. He fell, his face to the earth, without seeing Ho Bia again.

Kien stood before the captured men. They were not tied up, but they were exhausted from their lost battle, their clothes torn, filthy with mud and blood, offering no further resistance. They stood still and silent, shuffling their feet but indifferent to questions.

“Where are the three girls?” he asked calmly.

No answer.

“Well, where are they? If they’re still alive, you might live.”

The biggest of the four commandos, his left eye torn away by a bullet, looked over at Kien with his good eye. Blood and mud ran down his cheeks. He laughed scornfully, showing white teeth.

“The girls? We sacrificed them to the Water Spirit, sir. We used their bodies as an offering. They cried and carried on like crazy.”

Kien’s scouts drew their bayonets. Kien held them back.

“Stop! Don’t. Perhaps these guys might also want to cry like crazy as the girls did before they died. They won’t want to die immediately, will they?”

“Motherfucker! Kill us if you like!” another of them shouted. “Look at my hands, look, red from the bitches’ blood!”

“Shut up!” Kien said. “Don’t worry, we’ll do as you wish. I just want to know something. You came here to track us, the regular army, right? So why attack them? Why kill three young girls so brutally?”

No answer.

Kien cursed himself for wasting his time on them. Worse, he’d even been polite.

He ordered them to dig their own graves.

The four of them dug a common grave, digging quickly, enthusiastically, as though they were on contract.

“It doesn’t have to be so deep, it’s just for lying down in so that arms and legs won’t show,” said Kien. “And hurry up! It’ll soon be dark.”

Each of the four had a shovel, the usual collapsible multipurpose sharp tools. They were all healthy, muscled men. They dug violently, digging, scooping, throwing. The hole widened, deepened, then began to fill with reddish water.

“That’s enough, get out!” Kien ordered. He explained: “You have to get out before you throw in the bodies of your three friends. You don’t want to leave them to stink up the forest, do you?”

They asked permission to wash and have a last cigarette. Kien agreed, but his troops were not satisfied.

One said, “Why string it out? Give them some bronze candy!” It was the troops’ slang for bullets.

“I can’t stand these four assholes either,” said Kien. “They’ll be treated like dogs before they die, but there’s something I have to know.”

The four southern commandos went down to the stream and washed their hands slowly, carefully. They also washed the blood from their uniforms, then returned.

"Please have a cigarette, sir!" said the youngest of them, a round-faced, pale-skinned boy who spoke with a sweet northern accent. He politely offered the Rubi cigarette in cupped hands to Kien.

"Keep it!" Kien waved him away. "Offer it to your pals when you're under the ground."

The young commando sighed, then looked imploringly at Kien, lowering his voice: "Sir, the one who was impolite to you is our commander. Yes, he's a lieutenant."

"Is he? Well, he'll just be an ordinary soldier below ground. Not your commander, so forget it, don't worry."

"Please don't kill me," the young man said. "I didn't rape any of those girls. I didn't stab them even once. I swear I didn't. I'm a Catholic."

"You don't have to swear to me. Get back in line!" Kien replied.

But the young man, tears running down his cheeks, kneeled down in front of Kien. "Please take pity on me, sir, I'm still so young, sir. I have an old mother. I'm going to get married. We love each other. I beg you!"

Trembling, he took a leather purse from his pocket and from it produced a small colored photograph which he placed in Kien's hands. Kien held the photo, looking at it. A young girl wearing a black swimsuit stood with her back to the sea. She smiled happily, her wavy hair surrounding her face and covering her shoulders. She held an ice-cream cone in one hand and waved with the other. A tiny, graceful wave from a girl so beautiful that he could look at her forever. Kien wiped the raindrops from the photo and handed it back to the boy.

"She's beautiful. Nice photo. Put it away or it'll get wet."

The commando gasped, his mouth dry. His eyes shone with hope. "You mean you'll let me live? Really? Oh, thank God!"

"Back to your hole!" shouted Kien. "Son of a bitch! Light your last smoke, or your time is up! You others too, be quick!"

The young man joined the three others, who now sat on the edge of the grave dangling their feet over the bodies of their three friends who had been tossed into the hole. Around the scene light blue cigarette smoke, warm and pleasant, drifted lazily into the drizzle of rain. Darkness was descending from the slopes and the stream gurgled around them.

"Now!" said Kien, pulling the AK from his shoulder. "Line up!"

The four pale faces looked up, afraid and intense.

"Stand up, in one row," Kien repeated casually, pressing his thumb into the trigger guard of the submachine gun. "Move!"

"Sir, let us finish our cigarette!" It was the same young man with the

northern accent.

“Stand up!” Kien shouted again.

“Let them finish, Kien,” a scout whispered hoarsely into Kien’s ear.

The condemned men stood up, leaning against each other. Imminent death had left them fearless, their faces hardened. They looked with hatred at Kien, who became angry as he looked at them sneering at death.

“So, you don’t mind dying? I’ll satisfy you, with as much blood as you want. Like you did the girls.” Kien was shouting, then laughing grimly.

He fired. Over their heads.

The young northern Catholic began crying. He rushed forward to Kien and knelt, his face on Kien’s feet. Whining, praying, sobbing, he writhed close to the ground, but no words came.

“You’re volunteering to go first?” asked Kien, placing the gun barrel against the boy’s forehead.

“No, please, let me live, I beg all of you! Let me live, I pray, sir, I beg you!” Kien shoved the barrel hard on his head and the young commando fell back. The blow seemed to bring him to his senses and he stopped crying. Still kneeling, he raised himself slightly, looking warily around first at Kien, then the others. His hands wandered over his wound. A cut on his forehead had started blood streaming down his nose.

“I volunteer to fill in the grave,” he said. “You don’t have to tire yourself doing it. I’ll also tell you all the information I know. Your party’s policy is to punish those who run away and forgive those who return, so you have no right to kill me. No right! Please, I beg you, beg you!”

Someone behind Kien touched his arm, whispering to him in a trembling voice: “Kien, why don’t we forgive them for now and send them to our superiors to decide?”

Kien turned. It was Cu. Kien burned with anger and he let fly in fury, sticking his gun into Cu’s mouth. “If you want to show your love for them go stand in the line with them. I’ll kill you too! You too!”

—

“Kien, Kien, what the hell makes you cry so loud?”

The truckdriver’s beefy hand pushed through the hammock onto Kien’s shoulder, shaking him awake.

“Get up! Get ready! Quick!”

Kien slowly opened his eyes. The dark rings under them revealed his deep exhaustion. The painful memory of the dream throbbed against his temples. After some minutes he got up, then slowly climbed down from the hammock and dropped from the back of the truck to the ground.

Seeing how sluggishly Kien ate, the driver sighed and said, “It’s because

you slept back there with nearly fifty bodies. You had nightmares. Right?"

"Yes. Unbelievably horrible. I've had nightmares since joining this team, but last night's was the worst."

"No doubt," the driver said, waving his hand in a wide arc. "This *is* the Jungle of Screaming Souls. It looks empty and innocent, but in fact it's crowded. There are so many ghosts and devils all over this battleground! I've been driving for this corpse-collecting team since early seventy-three but I still can't get used to the passengers who come out of their graves to talk to me. Not a night goes by without them waking me up to have a talk. It terrifies me. All kinds of ghosts, new soldiers, old soldiers, soldiers from the 10th Division, the 2nd Division, soldiers from the provincial armed forces, the 320th Mobile Forces, 559th Corps, sometimes women, and every now and again some southern souls, from Saigon." The driver spoke as though it were common knowledge.

"Meet any old friends?" asked Kien.

"Sure! Even some from my own village. Guys from my first unit. Once I met a cousin who died way back in sixty-five."

"Do you speak to them?"

"Yes, but...well, differently. The way you speak in hell. There are no sounds, no words. It's hard to describe. It's like when you're dreaming—you know what I mean."

"You can't actually do anything to help each other?" asked Kien. "Do you talk about interesting things?"

"Not very. Just sad and pitiful things, really. Under the ground in the grave human beings aren't the same. You can look at each other, understand each other, but you can't do anything for each other."

"If we found a way to tell them news of a victory, would they be happier?" Kien asked.

"Come on! Even if we could, what would be the point? People in hell don't give a damn about wars. They don't remember killing. Killing is a career for the living, not the dead."

"Still, wouldn't peacetime be an ideal moment for the resurrection of all the dead?"

"What? Peace? Damn it, peace is a tree that thrives only on the blood and bones of fallen comrades. The ones left behind in the Screaming Souls battlegrounds were the most honorable people. Without them there would be no peace," the driver replied.

"That's a rotten way to look at it. There are so many good people, so many yet to be born, so many survivors now trying to live decent lives. Otherwise it's not been worth it. I mean, what's peace for? Or what's fighting for?" Kien asked.

"Okay, I'll grant you we have to have hope. But we don't even know if the

next generation will get a chance to grow up, or if they do, how they'll grow up. We do know that many good people have been killed. Those of us who survived have all been trying to make something of ourselves, but not succeeding.

"But look at the chaotic postwar situation in the cities, with their black markets. Life is so frustrating, for all of us. And look at the bodies and the graves of our comrades! The ones who brought the peace. Shameful, my friend, shameful."

"But isn't peace better than war?"

The driver seemed astonished. "This kind of peace? In this kind of peace it seems people have unmasked themselves and revealed their true, horrible selves. So much blood, so many lives were sacrificed—for what?"

"Damn it, what are you trying to say?" Kien asked.

"I'm not trying to say anything. I'm simply a soldier like you who'll now have to live with broken dreams and with pain. But, my friend, our era is finished. After this hard-won victory fighters like you, Kien, will never be normal again. You won't even speak with your normal voice, in the normal way again."

"You're so damn gloomy. What a doom-laden attitude!"

"I am Tran Son, a soldier. That's why I'm a bit of a philosopher. You never curse your luck? Never feel elated? What did the dead ones tell you in your dreams last night? Call that normal?" he asked.

On the way out the Zil truck moves in slow, jerky movements. The road is bumpy, muddy and potholed. Son stays in first gear, the engine revving loudly as if about to explode. Kien looks out of the window, trying to lighten his mood.

The rain stops, but the air is dull, the sky lead-grey. Slowly they move away from the Screaming Souls Jungle and the whole forest area itself. Behind them the mountains, the streams, all drop away from view.

But strangely, Kien now feels another presence, feels someone is watching him. Is the final scene, the unfinished, bloody dream of this morning, about to intrude itself in his mind? Will the pictures unfold against his wishes as he sits staring at the road?

Kien called to Son over the roar of the engine, asking if he'd be finished with MIA work after this tour of duty.

"Not sure. There's a lot of paperwork to do. What are your plans?"

"First, finish school. That means evening classes. Then try the university entrance exams. Right now my only skills are firing submachine guns and collecting bodies. What about you, will you keep driving?"

The truck reached a drier section of road and Son was able to go up a gear, dropping the loud engine revs.

"When we're demobbed I'll stop driving. I'll carry my guitar everywhere

and be a singer. Sing and tell stories. ‘Gentlemen, brothers and sisters, please listen to my painful story, then I’ll sing you a horror song of our times.’”

“Very funny,” said Kien. “If you ask me, we’d do better to tell them to forget about the war altogether.”

“But how can we forget? We’ll never forget any of it, never. Admit it. Go on, admit it!”

Sure, thinks Kien, it’s hard to forget. When will I calm down? When will my heart be free of the tight grip of war? Whether pleasant or ugly memories, they are there to stay for ten, twenty years, perhaps forever.

From now on life may be always dark, full of suffering, with brief moments of happiness. Living somewhere between a dream world and reality, on the knife-edge between the two.

I’ve lived all these lost years. No one to blame for that. Not me, not anyone else. All I know now is that I’m still alive after twenty-seven years and from now on I have to fend for myself.

There’s a new life ahead of me, and a new era for Vietnam. I have to survive.

But my soul is still in turmoil. The past years out here imprison me. My past seems to enfold me and move with me wherever I go. At night while I sleep I hear my steps from a distant peacetime echoing on the pavement. I just have to shut my eyes to conjure up those past times and completely wipe out the present.

So many tragic memories, so much pain from long ago that I have told myself to forget, yet it is that easy to return to them. My memories of war are always close by, easily provoked at random moments in these days which are little but a succession of boring, predictable, stultifying weeks.

Not long ago, in a dream, I was back standing in the Jungle of Screaming Souls. The stream, the dirt road, the empty grass clearings, the edge of the forest of days gone by, were sparkling in sunshine. I was standing in this peaceful, picturesque scene, looking southwest towards the four olive-green peaks of Ngoc Bo Ray mountain, when my new dream adventure began.

The whole night long I reviewed the life of my scout platoon. Each day, each memory, each person, appeared on a separate page of the dream. At last there was the scene by the stream where the whole scout platoon gathered around Lofty Thinh’s grave, the afternoon before we left for a major battle in the Central Highlands.

“Thinh, you stay here in the forest. We’re leaving to fight a battle,” I heard

my voice echoing from that afternoon. On behalf of the whole platoon I said farewell to Think's soul.

"From the depths of the earth, dear friend, please listen to us and give us your blessing, as we now must fight and break through the enemies' lines. Please listen for the sounds of our guns. Your friends will shake sky and earth with the guns to avenge your death," the prayer concluded.

Oh, my lost years and months and days! My lost era! My lost generation!

Another night with bitter tears wetting the pillow.

Another night, also in a dream, I saw pretty Hoa in the Screaming Souls Jungle. She'd been born in Hai Hau in 1949, but killed a long way from home in 1968, when not even twenty. Hoa's story was part of my mental war films, but somehow buried along with many others until now.

We were only able to meet for a moment in my dream, a passing glance at each other. In the thick mist of the dream I could only see Hoa vaguely, far away. But I felt a passionate love and a grieving intimacy I'd not felt for her at the time of our traumatic, violent parting after Second Tet in 1968. During our brief time together I'd only felt a shameful impotence, a feeling of defeat and desperate exhaustion.

For the entire night I floated in the sea of suffering called Mau Than, the tragic year of 1968. When I awoke it was almost dawn, yet the dream images were then transferred to my waking hours: Hoa fallen in a grassy clearing in the jungle, the American troops rushing towards her, then surrounding her, like bare-chested apes, puffing and panting, grabbing her, breathing heavily over her body. My throat still hurt from screaming during the nightmare, my lips were bleeding, the buttons of my pajama coat had been ripped off, my chest was deeply scratched, and my heart beat painfully, as though I were in danger, not our courageous Hoa.

Since returning to Hanoi I've had to live with this parade of horrific memories, day after day, long night after long night. For how many years now?

For how many more years?

Often in the middle of a busy street, in broad daylight, I've suddenly become lost in a daydream. On smelling the stink of rotten meat I've suddenly imagined I was back crossing Hamburger Hill in 1972, walking over strewn corpses. The stench of death is often so overpowering I have to stop in the middle of the pavement, holding my nose, while startled, suspicious people step around me, avoiding my mad stare.

In my bedroom, on many nights the helicopters attack overhead, the dreaded whump-whump-whump of their rotor blades bringing horror for us in the field. I curl up in defense against the expected vapor-streak and the howling of their rockets.

But the whump-whump-whump continues without the attack, and the

helicopter image dissolves, and I see in its place a ceiling fan. Whump-whump-whump.

I am watching a U.S. war movie with scenes of American soldiers yelling as they launch themselves into combat on the TV screen, and once again I'm ready to jump in and mix it in the fiery scene of blood, mad killing, and brutality that warps soul and personality. The thirst for killing, the cruelty, the animal psychology, the evil desperation. I sit dizzied, shocked by the barbarous excitement of reliving close combat with bayonets and rifle butts. My heart beats rapidly as I stare at the dark corners of the room where ghost-soldiers emerge, shredded with gaping wounds.

My life seems little different from that of a sampan pushed upstream towards the past. The future lied to us, there long ago in the past. There is no new life, no new era, nor is it hope for a beautiful future that now drives me on, but rather the opposite. The hope is contained in the beautiful prewar past.

The tragedies of the war years have bequeathed to my soul the spiritual strength that allows me to escape the infinite present. The little trust and will to live that remains stems not from my illusions but from the power of my recall.

Still, even in the midst of my reminiscences I can't avoid admitting there seems little left for me to hope for. From my life before soldiering there remains sadly little. That wonderful period has been heartlessly extinguished. The lucky star of fortune I once had seems also to be gone forever. It once shone brightly, but quickly burned out. The aura of hope in those early postwar days swiftly faded.

Those who survived continue to live. But that will has gone, that burning will which was once Vietnam's salvation. Where is the reward of enlightenment due to us for attaining our sacred war goals? Our history-making efforts for the great generations have been to no avail. What's so different here and now from the vulgar and cruel life we all experienced during the war?

Even me, I'm nearly forty. I was seventeen at the start of the war in 1965, twenty-seven at the fall of Saigon in 1975. So, how many long years have passed? Ten or eleven? Twelve? No. Thirteen? Another year with the MIA team. Or was it longer? And more time wandering as a veteran. Closer to fourteen years lost because of the war.

And me already forty. An age I once thought distant, strange, somehow unattainable.

From the horizon of the distant past an immense sad wind, like an endless sorrow, gusts and blows through the cities, through the villages, and through my life.

Kien lays his pen down. He turns off the table lamp, pushes his chair away, stands up and silently walks to the window. It is very cold in the room, yet he feels hot and breathless. He is uneasy, as though he feels a violent summer thunderstorm approaching, heralded by gusts of alternately hot and cold air.

So bitter is his frustration that he feels his pen takes him closer to at first and then more distant from what he wishes to say.

Every evening, before sitting at his desk and opening his manuscript, he tries to generate the appropriate atmosphere, the right feelings. He tries to separate each problem, the problem of paragraphs and pages, wishing to finish them in a specific way and by a specific time. He plans the sequences in his mind. What his heroes will do and what they will say in particular circumstances. How they'll meet, how they'll part. He lays the design of this out in his mind before taking up his pen.

But the act of writing blurs his neat designs, finally washing them away altogether, or blurs them so the lines become intermixed and sequences lose their order.

Upon rereading the manuscript he is astounded, then terrified, to read that his hero from a previous page has, on this page, disintegrated. Worse, that his heroes are inconsistent and contradictory and make him uneasy. The more uneasy he feels the quicker the task at hand slides from his mind.

On some nights, he energetically follows a certain line, pursuing it sentence by sentence, page by page, building it into a substantial work. He wrestles with it, becomes consumed by it, then in a flash sees it is all irrelevant. Standing back from it he then sees no value in the frantic work, for the storyline stands beyond that circled arena of his soul, that little secret area which we all know intuitively contains our spiritual reserves.

Kien seems to write only to rid himself of his devils. Neither the torment of regret brought on by wasted writing efforts nor the loss of his health can overcome his urgent desire to be a perfectionist. The threat of being pinned to his writing-desk for great lengths of time similarly does not concern him. He continues his quest for perfection, crossing out, erasing, crossing out again, editing, tearing up some pages, then tearing up and destroying all. Then he starts over again, making out each syllable like a learner trying to spell a new word.

Even so, he still believes in his writing and his talent. It is something else that needs to be addressed, something intangible, other than the writing. So, he begins again, writing and waiting, writing and waiting, sometimes nervous, overexcited.

He seems to mature as he works, and grows more confident from this belief, and pushes on with new confidence, despite all the past failures, patiently savoring the end-result he anticipates from his artistic endeavor and creativity.

Despite this growing confidence, he frequently relapses and once again

feels like a man standing on the edge of an abyss.

Despite his conviction, his dedication, he also sometimes suspects his recall of certain events. Is there a force at work within him that creates this suspicion?

He dares not abandon himself to emotions, yet in each chapter Kien writes of the war in a deeply personal way, as though it had been his very own war. And so on and on, frantically writing, Kien refights all his battles, relives the times where his life was bitter, lonely, surreal, and full of obstacles and horrendous mistakes. There is a force at work in him that he cannot resist, as though it opposes every orthodox attitude taught him and it is now his task to expose the realities of war and to tear aside conventional images.

It is a dangerous spin he is in, flying off at a tangent, away from the traditional descriptive writing styles, where everything is orderly. Kien's heroes are not the usual predictable, stiff figures but real people whose lives take diverse and unexpected directions.

After all his trial essays, short stories, and novellas comes this novel, which he suddenly realizes is his last adventure as a soldier. Curious, for it is at the same time his most serious challenge in life; in writing this work he has driven himself to the brink of insanity. There is no escape, no savior to help him. He alone must meet this writing challenge, his last duty as a soldier.

In contemplation an odd idea takes root in his mind—or has it been there for many years? At the bottom of his heart he believes he exists on this earth to perform some unnamed heavenly duty. A task that is sacred and noble, but secret. He begins to believe that it is because of this heavenly duty that he had such a brief childhood and adolescence, then matured in time of war. The duty imposed on him in his first forty years a succession of suffering with very few joys. Those who selected Kien to perform these sacred tasks also ordained that he should survive the war, even in battles where it seemed impossible to escape death. The heavenly glow which streaked, sparkled, and vanished like a falling star had bathed him in serene light for just a few moments, then disappeared so suddenly that he had no time to understand its full import.

The first time he had felt this secret force was not on the battlefield but in peacetime, on his postwar MIA missions gathering the remains of the dead. The sacred force nurtured him, protected him, and willed him on, renewing his thirst for living and for love. He had never before acknowledged this heavenly duty, yet he had always known it existed within him as an integral part of him, melded with his soul.

From the time of that realization he felt that day by day his soul was gradually maturing, preparing for its task of fulfilling the sacred, heavenly duty of which the novel would become the earthly manifestation.

It was in summer five years ago that, totally by chance, on a lovely warm day he had stopped by the Nha Nam township. And from there he went on to revisit Doi Mo, a tiny, ancient hamlet where twenty years earlier his newly formed battalion had been based and had trained for three months while awaiting transportation to the front, called "Long B."

The landscape looked to Kien as though it had been forgotten by time. The pine plantations, the myrtles, grassy slopes, and eucalyptus in desolate and gloomy lines between fields were exactly as he remembered them as a young recruit. The houses were scattered about as he had remembered them, one on each small hilltop and each as dull and unimaginative as before.

With no particular plan in mind, Kien left the only road through the hamlet and turned down a dirt track almost overgrown by grass.

He knew the track led to Mother Lanh's house. She had been godmother to the many young recruits, especially his own three-man special team.

The house was still there, looking exactly as he had seen it the day he left: earthen wall, thatched roof, kitchen at the rear facing onto an overgrown small garden. Near a flight of steps, almost obscured by wildflowers and shrubs, was the same old well with its windlass. Godmother Lanh had died. So now it would be Lan, her youngest daughter, who lived here.

When Lan opened the door and stepped outside she recognized Kien immediately. She even remembered his platoon nickname, "Sorrowful Spirit." Kien had forgotten everything about her.

"In those days I was just thirteen years old. I still called you uncle. And we girls of the backwoods have always been shy and unattractive," she added in self-deprecation. But what Kien saw before him now twenty years later was an intelligent woman, quietly attractive, with mistily sad eyes.

Tears welled up in those sad eyes when Kien told her that the other two in the three-man squad who had stayed with Lan's mother had been killed on the battlefield. "What a cruel time," she said, "and so very long. The war swept away so many people. So many new recruits used to be based in my house. They used to call my mother their mother, and called me younger sister. But of all of them only you have returned. My two brothers, my classmates, and my husband, too, were all younger than you, and joined up years later than you. But none of them has returned. From so many, there is only you left, Kien. Just you."

She went with him to pay tribute to her mother. Kien burned incense sticks and bent his head in prayer for some time, letting the painful memory of those days throb through his temples while he tried in vain to conjure up the image of the godmother's face. The last rays of the sun were slanting over the long grasses, now tinged pink in the sunset.

She began speaking quietly: "If people had been patient in those days and let parents know of their son's deaths one at a time, my mother would still be alive today. But in the first weeks of peace the bureaucrats wanted to speed up

the delivery of bad news, to get it out of the way quickly. My mother was here one fateful morning when an official arrived bringing a death certificate for my brother, her first son. She took the news badly, although she had feared and expected it. She was buoyed only by the expectation of her second son coming home soon. But a few hours later another courier arrived with a second death certificate, telling her my other brother, her second son, had also been killed. Mother collapsed in a faint, then lapsed into a coma. She hung on for three days without uttering another word, then died."

Kien stared down at Lanh's tombstone, noticing for the first time a second, much smaller grave alongside it. Lan said quietly, "My son. He was almost eight pounds when he was born, but he only lived two days. His name was Viet. My husband was one of the Tay tribe, far from his province of Ha Giang. He had been based here for less than one month, so there was not even time to complete the formal wedding ceremony. Six months after he left I got a letter, but not from him. It was from one of his friends, writing to tell me he'd been killed on the way into Laos. I'm sure that's why our baby faded fast and died. It had no will to live."

They rose and slowly walked down to the house.

"So that's the short story of my life. First my brothers, then my mother, then my husband, then my son. No wonder I feel a little weaker every year. I live in this shell of loneliness, going from house to hill, hill to house, and around the hamlet, with no one paying any attention to me and me not noticing others.

"By a strange quirk of fate, my husband's was the last unit based here. After his group left no others came to Doi Mo. Now, after many years of peace, you are the only one to return here. Just you. None of the others."

She asked him to stay the night and he silently agreed. The short summer night softly enfolded them, and all that was heard was the sound of a nightbird calling from the edge of the forest and the distant rippling of the hamlet's slow stream.

Kien and Lan walked out together early in the morning; she stayed with him beyond the first hill, neither of them saying a word. The sun was warming them and the dew evaporated, rising around them. Lan's face seemed pale and drawn.

"A few years ago I decided to leave here," she said suddenly. "I intended to go south and rebuild my life. But I changed my mind. I just couldn't leave my mother and my son lying over there. I just wait and wait, without knowing what I'm waiting for. Or for whom. Perhaps I've been waiting for you."

Kien remained silent, avoiding her gaze.

"I knew who you were straight away, although you look very different now. Back then I was so small. But I knew. Perhaps you were my first love and it took all this time for me to realize it."

Kien tried to smile but his heart felt constricted. He gently raised Lan's

hand to his lips, bent his head, and kissed it a long time.

“Stay. Live peacefully, my sweet. Try not to be sad, and try not to think poorly of me.”

Lan leaned forward, caressing his shoulders and his greying hair.

“Forget me. Your life is an open road, go out and enjoy it. I’ll find a foster-child and we’ll live together peacefully. I wish I could have had your child, Kien, but it’s impossible. That doesn’t depress me. Just for a moment let’s imagine that we’ve both come back from the past, while our loved ones were still alive.

“I ask you to remember one small favor for me. If you come to the end of your wandering and seem to have nowhere left to go and no one to turn to, remember you have a place here with me, always. A home, a woman, a friend. Doi Mo hamlet was where you started this war. You can make it your point of return, if you want to.”

Kien hugged Lan, pressing her to his chest. She said in a muffled voice, “Please go now. I’ll never forget you. Please, don’t forget me completely, my unexpected lover.”

He left, bending his head into the summer morning sunlight which spread across the grassy roadside. When he turned he saw his long shadow reaching back, pointing to Lan in the distance. She had not moved.

She watched as he slowly walked away, and was still watching as he turned out of sight over a distant hill.

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Some years after that meeting, also on a summer afternoon, Kien and some journalist colleagues, riding a jeep back from the border, again passed through the same valley. The sight of the hills and streams, the smell of the earth brought to him on a pleasant wind, brought back powerful memories. Only he and the driver were still awake. Kien reminisced in silence, with a tinge of regret. It was here, this very place, where Lan had promised him a final refuge. “There is always one place and one woman here for you,” she had said.

The sad, doomed meeting echoed back to him, reminding him of that final act of kindness.

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Some of his loved ones he had not bothered to stay in contact with. Others had vanished. He had left yet others in his wake. He had lived selfishly these last years without looking back. Time and his work had taken over his life. He had sought neither opportunities nor responsibilities. His memories that afternoon reawakened in him the sense of sacred duty. He felt he must press on to fulfill his obligations, his duty as a writer.

It was necessary to write about the war, to touch readers' hearts, to move them with words of love and sorrow, to bring to life the electric moments, to let them, in the reading and the telling, feel they were there, in the past, with the author.

Why choose war? Why must he write of the war? His life and that of so many others was so horrible it could hardly be called a life. How can one find artistic recognition in that kind of life? They gossip about me, the author who wishes to write of the war. They say of me that the war author cannot even bear to enter a cinema where people may be shooting each other on the screen.

Is this the author who avoids reading anything about any war, the Vietnam war or any other great war? The one who is frightened by war stories? Yet who himself cannot stop writing war stories, stories of rifles firing, bombs dropping, enemies and comrades, wet and dry seasons in battle. In fact, the one who can't write about anything else.

The author who will later have to give all credit for his unique writing style and storytelling fame to those war stories.

When starting this novel, the first in his life, he planned a postwar plot. He started by writing about the MIA Remains-Gathering Team, those about-to-be-demobilized soldiers on the verge of returning to ordinary civilian life.

But relentlessly, his pen disobeyed him. Each page revived one story of death after another and gradually the stories swirled back deep into the primitive jungles of war, quietly restoking his horrible furnace of war memories.

He could have written about the macabre or about cruel brutality without writing about the war. He could also have written about his childhood, which was both painful and happy.

He could have written: "I was born and grew up...My late parents..." and so on. And why not write of his father's life and his generation? That was a generation both great and tragic, a generation bursting at the seams with ambitious Utopians, people of elegant spiritual and emotional qualities, sadly now long forgotten by Kien's generation.

But when thinking of his childhood or his father, Kien becomes depressed. He feels that as a son he had not sufficiently loved or respected his father. He had not understood his father's life and remembered almost nothing about his family tragedy. He still doesn't know why his parents separated and knows even less about his mother. So it is strange that he remembers his mother's second husband so clearly.

His mother's second husband was a prewar poet who had gone into hiding to escape the anti-intellectual atmosphere of the state ideologies that came with Communism.

Kien had visited him just once in an old house in the Hanoi suburb of Chem, on the edge of the Red River. There was a small window facing the northern dike. Kien remembered the scene clearly. His real father had just died, five years after his mother, who had left him and married the poet who became his stepfather. Kien decided he should visit his stepfather to say farewell before going away with the army. He was seventeen at the time and the visit left an indelible impression.

The house was old and greyish, surrounded by a sad, unkempt winter garden which itself was ringed by wispy eucalyptus that rustled in the light breeze.

The entire scene reflected his stepfather's extreme poverty. On a dusty family altar his mother's photo rested in a frame with broken glass. The bed in

the same room was limp and bedraggled. A writing table was a mess of books, papers, and glasses. The atmosphere was depressing. Yet in sharp contrast his stepfather lived in a style which belied his conditions. His thinning white hair was neatly combed back, disguising some scars, his beard was well shaven and tidy, and his clothes were clean and pressed.

He treated Kien warmly and politely and with the correct intimacy for the occasion, making him hot tea and inviting him to smoke and generally feel at home.

Kien noticed that his eyes were blurred and his scraggy and frail old hands trembled.

He looked over to Kien and said gently, "So, you're off to the war? Not that I can prevent you. I'm old, you are young. I couldn't stop you if I wanted to. I just want you to understand me when I say that a human being's duty on this earth is to live, not to kill." Then he said, "Taste all manner of life. Try everything. Be curious and inquire for yourself. Don't turn your back on life."

Kien was surprised by the integrity of his stepfather's words and he listened intently.

"I want you to guard against all those who demand that you die just to prove something. It is not that I advise you to respect your life more than anything else, but not to die uselessly for the needs of others. You are all we have left, your mother, your father, and I. I hope you live through the war and return home to Hanoi, for you still have many years ahead of you. Many years of joy and happiness to experience. Who else but you can experience your life?"

Surprised, and far from agreeing with him, Kien nevertheless trusted his stepfather's words, feeling an affinity with his sentiments. He saw in the old man a wise, multifaceted intelligence with a warm, romantic heart that seemed to belong to another era, a sentimental era with all its sweet dreams and heightened awareness, alien to Kien but attractive nonetheless.

He understood then why his mother had left his father and come to live with this wise, kind-hearted man.

For the entire afternoon he sat with his stepfather in the room in which his mother had lived her last years, and where she had died. And that winter afternoon became his only memory of his mother, a memory of warmth and a special atmosphere conjured up by his stepfather as he read old love poems he had composed for her when he was young. He took a guitar down from the wall and started singing in a deep voice a song by Van Cao, a song his mother had loved. It was a slow, melancholy song recalling loved ones who were forever gone, decrying life's unhappiness yet with a strain of underlying hope:

*Don't lament, don't bathe in the sorrows.
Look up and live on...*

After joining the army, Kien had written to his stepfather but had no reply. After the war, ten years after his visit that afternoon, Kien returned again to find him.

But when he arrived neighbors told him his stepfather had died many years earlier. Even the house had gone. It had been destroyed long ago. No one remembered the circumstances of his death, or even how the house had been destroyed.

Such a man, such a story, Kien pondered. But there were so many romantics like him now; some close to him, others from just outside his immediate circle.

Once, at his desk in the editorial office of his magazine, a strange man who wished to remain anonymous approached him, asking for his story to be run in the magazine. It was a love story. The main characters were this man and his wife. "If the names are changed we can then really tell the truth of this very beautiful but tragic story," he told Kien. It was to be an extraordinary present for his sick wife, to commemorate the thirtieth anniversary of their marriage. Wasn't that great?

Kien thought the story was a load of rubbish and very boring. Yet the courage and determination of the man, and his strong desire to create this unusual present, impressed him, set him thinking.

He could, for example, write a novel about his neighbors above, below, and on the same floor as his own apartment in the one building. It could be a story of symphonies. Not a war story.

Stories, humorous, heartrending, arose every day. Anywhere people were jammed up close together and forced to share their lives. On summer evenings when there were power blackouts and it was too hot inside, everyone came to sit out in front, near the only water tap servicing the whole three-story building.

The tap trickled, as drop by drop every story was told. Nothing remained secret. People said that Mrs. Thuy, the teacher widowed since her twenties, who was about to retire and become a grandmother, had suddenly fallen in love with Mr. Tu, the bookseller living on the corner of the same street. The two old people had tried to hide their love but had failed. It was true love, something that can't be easily hidden.

Or Mr. Cuong, on the third floor, who when drunk once set about his wife with a big stick but by mistake whacked his own mother. The latest gossip was about Mr. Thanh, the retired sea captain, whose family was always having problems. They were so poor they would even squabble over a bowl of rice. Poor Thanh wanted no more of it, so he decided to commit suicide. He tried once with a rope, then with insecticide, but both times he was discovered

and rescued.

Thanh was still better off than old Mrs. Sen, blind and lonely, the mother of two sons killed in action. Mrs. Sen's nephew and his wife cheated the poor old lady out of her room by having her sent to a mental hospital to die. The nephew was not only well educated but well-heeled. He had graduated from the University of Finance and Economics, he traveled abroad frequently, spoke two foreign languages, and lived an easy life. On returning each afternoon he would eat a huge meal, then go out onto the balcony to rest, belching repeatedly and yawning. His wife, a boring, tight-lipped, serious woman, worked in the courts. Not once had she ever been seen to smile at her neighbors.

There was Mr. Bao, also on the third floor, living with his parents, Dr. Binh and his wife. He had been released from prison in the recent New Year Amnesty and quickly won the sympathy of all the people in the building. He had originally been sentenced to death, then had that reduced to a life sentence, then to twenty years. Bao didn't look like a criminal. His many years as a prisoner had turned him into a devout, religious man. Only a short time after being released this formerly dangerous convict surprised his fellow apartment-dwellers with many acts of kindness, and kind helpful words. The only reservation was his obvious sadness, betrayed by his deep, sad eyes. When he looked sad everyone felt sorry for him.

Even such a tiny stream of life, running through this apartment building, contained so many waterfalls, so many cliffs, so many eddies and whirlpools. Children were born to life, sprouted like mushrooms after a shower of rain, grew up, became adults. The adults grew old, some of them falling away every year. Generation after generation, like the waves of the sea.

Last summer, old Du—the great barber of Hanoi—had died in his ninety-seventh year. He was the last survivor of the prewar generation known to Kien.

“No one, neither the Genie of Jade nor the King of Hell, will allow me to live the last three years of my own century,” his loud voice had declared. He had tried to make a joke of it when Kien came visiting him. “Please write a play for me, entitled *The Barber of Hanoi*. I'll come up from hell to see the first performance.”

He had been a barber from the time when Hanoi gentlemen followed the ancient Chinese custom and wore their hair braided into queues. “These days they call them pigtails, but that would have been an insult. Queues denoted authority and culture,” he had said. “Under my hands three hundred thousand heads and faces have been beautified, turned from messy and rough to tidy and perfumed. Under my sculptor's hands, rough stone is turned into beautiful statues.”

Before the war his children, his grandchildren, and all his great-grandchildren were gathered around him in one big family, and although not

one of them followed in his footsteps as a barber everyone enjoyed his influence and his style as a raconteur. He worked hard, creating a large, kind family, all pleasant and fun-loving. In his childhood memories Kien sees old Du's scissors and hears the snip, snip, snip, as Du tells his funny stories, interspersed with bars from the *Marseillaise*, sung out of tune.

For Kien, the most attractive, persistent echo of the past is the whisper of ordinary life, not the thunder of war, even though the sounds of ordinary life were washed away totally during the long storms of war. The prewar peace and the postwar peace were in such contrast.

It is the whispers of friends and ordinary people now attempting ordinary peacetime pursuits which are the most horrifying. Like the case of Father Du, who presided over a very large and happily noisy family. Today he is the only living male. Like Huynh, the tram driver, whose three sons all died on the battlefield. Like Sinh, wounded in the spine, more dead than alive until he finally died where he had lain for so long.

The spirits of all those killed in the war will remain with Kien beyond all political consequences of the war.

So many friends of the same age have long since departed, never to return. Their houses are still here in Hanoi, their images part of them. Their images also endure in the faces of the new generation.

—

Kien remembers Hanh, a single girl who lived in the prewar days in the small room close to the stairs, a room which now belongs to Mr. Su. Hardly anyone now remembers why Hanh left, or when.

Hanh was older than Kien. When he was very young he would see men quiver with lust when Hanh walked by. They would fight each other to get close to her door. The ones on Hanh's side of the street tried to fight those from the even-numbered houses across the street to stop them from encroaching on their territory, meaning the doorways on the odd-numbered side, where Hanh would walk by at least twice a day. Every time she passed, walking nonchalantly, her long tresses swaying, she would exude a youthful charm that aroused the men. They would stiffen, stop what they were doing, and stare after her with feverish, blatant desire.

The girls around there hated her, calling her a bitch, a whore, or a witch because of her innocent influence, of which she remained either unconcerned or completely ignorant. Kien felt their passionate hatreds were based on envy and lies. Hanh was a normal, neighborly girl, he felt. "Good morning, sister," he would say politely when she emerged. "Good morning, younger brother, you're really a nice boy," she would say, tousling his hair. At the Lunar New Year celebrations she gave Kien a gift of money, just as she did the other children in the building. Brand-new crisp banknotes, and wishes for a happy school year. "Be a good pupil. Why, you already look almost grown up. Just

take care not to be big in body but tiny in brain, my younger brother!" she laughed.

But it was not very long before she began to change her style of address to Kien. He had turned into a handsome and strong seventeen-year-old and was about to graduate. But he and Phuong, his classmate and sweetheart from childhood, were both so intensely occupied with each other that neither seemed to notice what Hanh had observed, that Kien had matured into an impressively attractive young man.

War was looming. Hanoi was considered a noncombat area, yet the authorities ordered the population to practice evacuation, to dig shelters, to heed air-raid sirens, and to wear dark clothing. During a lunch break at home from school one day Kien was startled when Hanh slipped quietly into his room. "Hey, younger brother, how about helping me later. I want to dig an air-raid shelter under my bed so I don't have to tear down the street every time that siren goes off."

"Okay, sister, I'll help you."

That evening was his first time in a room alone with a girl. It was small but sensitively decorated. Kien wanted to ask her not to destroy the harmony of the room but she had already started on the digging work. He started to dig in the corner by her small bed, about ten tiles in from the wall. He used a crowbar to break into the foundation, then a hoe and a shovel. Bit by bit, through bricks and the rubble of the foundations, they dug deeper.

Hanh had prepared a nice dinner and bought beer for Kien. After dinner Kien began to feel a little uneasy, but said nothing, starting on the digging again. In the middle of the work there was a blackout and they had no electric light. Hanh brought out a small kerosene lamp and they continued, with Kien digging and Hanh carrying away the soil in buckets. Both worked silently, patiently, for a long time.

"This is probably deep enough," said Kien, panting. "It's above my chest, which means the level of your chin. Don't make it too deep."

"Yes. Let's stop there. But let me try it. We might need some steps for me to get down into it easily," she said, holding her arms out to slip into the shelter.

Hanh didn't look much shorter than Kien, but once inside the shelter in the dimly lit room, she only came up to his chin. Her body pressed into his tall, muscular body as he lifted her down.

She sensed the intimacy and seemed to change her mind, wishing to get back out, but the shelter was too narrow and deep. Her urgent mood transferred itself to Kien, whose body began heaving uncontrollably with a burning male sensation that he'd never felt before. He breathed heavily, trying to cope, but the sensations produced by her closeness, her perfume, her hair, her shoulders, her breasts under her thin shirt pressing hard against him, slowly overpowered him.

Confused and trembling, out of control, Kien hugged her tightly, bending to kiss her neck, then her shoulders, as she twisted her body to get clear of him. Clumsily he pressed her against the earthen wall, triggering tensions in his muscles, which snapped a shirt button, springing it wide open and bringing him suddenly to his senses.

He threw his head back, stepped away, and released Hanh, then lifted himself quickly out of the little shelter onto the floor, poised to run out of the room. But in his rush he knocked over the kerosene lamp, which went out.

“Kien,” Hanh called in a low voice. “Don’t go, don’t run off. Please help me. I can’t see a thing.”

Trembling, Kien bent down and grasped her under her arms and lifted her out, ripping his shirt open even wider as he lifted. Hanh raised her arms and placed them around his neck, whispering to him: “Go upstairs for a moment, but don’t stay long. Come down soon. There’s something I want to tell you,” she said.

Kien went quietly back to his room, took a bath, and slowly put on fresh clothes. But he couldn’t summon the courage to return downstairs. He started, but stopped. He sat down. He lay down, but he couldn’t sleep. His emotions were running riot, willing him to return. But his conservative training in restraint anchored him to the spot. The hours dragged by, until he saw the first glint of dawn. He sat up suddenly, walked barefoot to the landing, and tiptoed downstairs to Hanh’s room, where his courage ran out again. He pressed his face to the door, his heart beating loudly. He didn’t dare knock, even when he heard a slight scratch of footsteps on the other side of the door and a latch being lifted ever so gently. Breathlessly Kien sensed Hanh’s body pressing on the inside of the door, a centimeter of timber between their bodies. He lowered his hand to the ceramic door-handle, trembling, but it froze on the handle for some seconds, then minutes, and he found no strength to turn it. He finally released the handle, turned around noisily, and ran back upstairs, throwing himself on the bed in defeat.

From that day on, Kien avoided her. If their paths accidentally crossed, Kien would bend his head and weakly mumble, “...Sister.” Hanh would look quietly and sympathetically at him and say, “Good day, younger brother.” She seemed willing to say more, to tell him something she had long wanted to say, but Kien’s continued avoidance of her acted as a deterrent. The words she longed to say would never be voiced. Perhaps in their dreams, for soon she was gone.

When Kien joined up Hanh had already become involved with the Volunteer Youth Brigade, which had gone off to Military Zone 4. When Kien returned to Hanoi before heading south he found a new occupant in Hanh’s old room. The deep shelter had been filled in and tiled over and there was no indication that the floor had ever been disturbed.

“There’s something I want to tell you,” she had said. The words lingered

with him for years.

When later he recalled his actions, her words, his timidity, he would grieve and regret his loss.

The passing of beautiful youth had been so rapid that even its normal periods of anxiety and torment, of deep intense blind love, had been taken from him as the war clouds loomed. A moment so close, yet so far, then totally lost to him, to remain only as a memory forever.

Kien sighed and pressed his face to the cold glass window, looking out into the dark night. He could see the top of the tree in front of his house, the leaves brushing wetly against his window.

In the streets below scattered lights shone, the light mixing with the rain. Illumination stopped at the end of the street, marking the start of the vast lake. Swinging his vision to the right he saw the dark cloud canopies low over the familiar tiled roofs of Hanoi, although hardly any of the houses emitted light. There were no cars on the street, and not a single pedestrian.

At this moment the city was so calm that one could practically hear the clouds blow over the rooftops. He thought of them as part of his life being blown away in wispy sections, leaving vast, open areas of complete emptiness, as in his own life.

The spirit of Hanoi is strongest by night, even stronger in the rain. Like now, when the whole town seems deserted, wet, lonely, cold, and deeply sad.

When they slept in the jungle the rain fell on forest canopies, and Kien would dream of Hanoi in the rain, Hanoi with leaves falling. Now, as he watched the leaves falling, he remembered the jungle rains and the dreams of Hanoi. The dreams focused and refocused until past scenes and the present became a raging reality within him, images of the present and the past merging to double the impact and the smell and atmosphere of the jungle there in the room with him. Wave after wave of agonizing memories washed over his mental shores.

One year in the seventies a false spring had appeared in Hanoi. The sun shone during the day and the air was as light and clean as any April or early May. The trees whose branches had turned bare during winter suddenly sprouted beautiful green buds. In the parks the flowers began blooming, and migratory birds began returning to nest under the eaves of city buildings. For those few moments in a season Hanoi lost its lonely, desolate look.

One day after that week of sunny midwinter days the sky darkened, an icy cold wind began gusting along the newly greened streets, and a sorrowful, drizzling rain began. The newly emerged buds retreated, the blooms wilted,

the birds remained hidden, and the colors and the new hope that had arrived like a golden promise evaporated into the reality of harsh grey winter.

Phuong, his childhood sweetheart, his classmate, his female lead in one of the strangest opening nights of the war theater, and his self-created ikon for salvation in peacetime, had left him again. She had gone from him when the false spring faded and real winter returned.

Phuong had left no note and since departing had not written to him. She had probably decided never to return. The doors and the windows in her apartment were shuttered and locked and had the look of permanency about them. That had been their first parting since he had returned from the war. Her sudden, cruel departure had cut Kien deeply.

Kien sat forlornly in his apartment, emotionally exhausted. A glint caught his eye and he turned to face a small mirror. What he saw astounded him: his hair, his beard, his wrinkles, the circles under his eyes. He tested his voice; even that had changed; it was now deep and sad. His looks, his voice, seemed to upset others these days. Was it the empty, blank stare he now saw in the mirror? Was that what they turned from, avoiding his glances?

He became bored with his university studies. One morning he simply decided he wouldn't attend. From that point on he ended his easy student life, quietly and for no apparent reason. He stopped reading newspapers, then books, then let everything go. He lost contact with his friends, then with the outside world in general. Except drink. And cigarettes. He couldn't care less that he was penniless, that he drank and smoked almost nonstop. He wandered around outside, pacing the lonely streets. When he did sleep, it was a heavy, drunken slumber.

In his dreams he saw Phuong now and then, but more often he dreamed of crazy, twisted things, distorted apparitions of loneliness and sorrow. Horrible, poisonous nightmares brought back images that had haunted him constantly throughout the war. During the twilights of those cold nights the familiar, lonely spirits reappeared from the Jungle of Screaming Souls, sighing and moaning to him, whispering as they floated around like pale vapors, shredded with bullet-holes. They moved into his sleep as though they were mirrors surrounding him.

He would often awake to find himself writhing on the floor, tears streaming down his face, shivering with fear and cold. His numbed heart was seized up and his emotions overcame him. When the icy winds outside blew fiercely and rain pelted heavily against his dark windows, he would just sit there, still, not wishing to move. Sad, foolish self-pity washed over him.

He had tried desperately to forget Phuong, but she was unforgettable. He longed for her still. Nothing lasted forever in this world, he knew that. Even love and sorrow inside an aging man would finally dissipate under the realization that his suffering, his tortured thoughts, were small and meaningless in the overall scheme of things. Like wispy smoke spiraling into

the sky, glimpsed for a moment, then gone.

That cold spring Kien was frequently out on the streets late at night. On one memorable night, near the Thuyen Quang park by the lake, he saw two figures struggling on the ground under a kapok tree. One of them, a man, rose quickly and drew a knife from his belt. Kien jumped into the fray, kicked the man, then knocked him into a gutter before chasing him off. He turned and saw that the second figure was an attractive young girl. Kien called a pedicab going past, bundled her into it, and headed for home. Once inside, he saw she was made up in the familiar flaunting way made famous by the “Green Coffee Girls” of the area. These were the most notable Hanoi prostitutes, so called because they waited for their men in a certain group of coffee houses.

“Do you know whose life it is you’ve just saved, and brought into your home? Well, do you?” she asked. “I’m a Green Coffee Girl.”

She stood, feet slightly apart, looking directly at him. Not yet nineteen, but sure of herself. A little paler, a little less healthy than he had first thought. And on closer scrutiny her bright clothes, attractive from a distance, had seen better days.

“That punch was worth a lot to me. That was real trouble for me. I owe you,” she said, taking charge. “You were just wonderful,” she added, stepping out of her skirt slowly. She continued to undress for him, ending by pulling her blouse lightly over her head. It was a smooth performance, but something was wrong. She began to shiver, smiling hesitantly, shyly. Kien noticed her smooth skin was blue with cold, that her ribs formed sharp lines under her breasts. She was starving.

“Let’s share that cigarette,” she said in a final effort to retain her composure. But after only one puff she slid into his bed, sighed like a sleepy child, and was soon in a deep sleep.

When she woke up she saw Kien sitting over by the table and realized with astonishment that she knew him. In the morning light she could see him clearly and recognized him as the friend of her big brother, in the same platoon, from years ago. Kien came over, lighting a new cigarette, then sat down on the bed beside her. In the light of the new day he had recognized her, too, despite the makeup.

As she slept he had wondered how she came to be in town. Why had she left her village? How had she joined the most famous of all the street-girl groups, the Green Coffee Girls?

She was embarrassed by the recognition. The shared memory of her brother Vinh, with him in the same platoon, at M’Drac battlefield with him, was with them both. And of their only other sad meeting.

After the war Kien had taken his friend’s last possessions to Vinh’s family,

in a hamlet on the outer edges of Hanoi. The landscape was half marsh, half rubbish dump. The scrawny children wore rags. Dirty dogs ran here and there and the flies, mosquitoes, and rats were numerous and evident. The hamlet's inhabitants were semibeggars, gathering garbage for their meager living, and there were small dumps of obviously stolen goods lining the paths where thieves had set up tiny stalls.

Someone pointed out Vinh's family house to Kien. It was like all the others, a shanty of tin and old timber, surrounded by garbage. Vinh's little sister was barely fifteen then. Her eyes had swollen and sent tears down her cheeks as she recognized her brother's knapsack and his personal belongings. There was no need to ask why Kien had come to visit them. The sad news was there for them to touch. Vinh's blind mother sat with the girl, feeling the items as she handed them over. A cloth hat. A folded knife. An iron bowl. A broken flute. A notebook. When Kien rose to leave, the old lady had reached up and touched his cheek. "At least you came back," she said quietly.

He stared at the little sister, now naked in his bed, a blanket wrapped around her shoulders. He had forgotten her name and was now too embarrassed to ask. She began to speak, quietly: "My mother died that same year. I stopped collecting garbage. In fact, the dump doesn't even exist now. I came to town alone."

They each spilled their stories, talking throughout the morning. She in bed, he beside it. Kien found some rice and fried it over his kerosene stove, and they shared a small meal. She rested again.

Later she opened her eyes, looking over at him with a small smile. She reached out and began tugging his arm, inviting him to slide in beside her. Kien held back.

"Come on, please. You saved me," she said.

When Kien declined again, she seemed thankful and didn't persist. "You're funny," she said. "Strange, I mean."

Kien moved around the room picking up anything of value he could find. Paper money, lottery tickets, anything. After she'd dressed and was preparing to leave he handed her the money and the tickets. She started laughing gaily, but took them. He saw her out into the street and back up to the Thuyen Quang lake, where he had helped her the long night before. "You'd better make yourself scarce," she told him. "People will jump to wrong conclusions if they see you with me. I'll never forget you, though. You're really nice, and strange."

The girl withdrew her hand and walked away. He felt so dry, so vulgar, so impotent and spent. The result of those months and years at war.

—

He was at a stage when he had no idea how he would spend the rest of his life.

Study? Career? Business? All those things he had once considered important, and attainable, suddenly seemed meaningless and beyond his reach. He was still alive—just. He had no idea of how he would earn his daily living. It was a time of utter isolation, of spiritual emptiness, of surrender.

Yet the city was now coming alive again, this time in a synthetically generated frenzy of patriotism. Another war was about to break out! Pol Pot had been chased out of Cambodia by Vietnamese troops and because of that Pol Pot's allies, the Chinese, were threatening Vietnam's northern border. This would be another turning-point in their lives. Kien's friends emerged to advise him to rejoin the army. Long live his career! Long live the army of Vietnam! A good soldier would always be invaluable, they said. That went on for weeks.

In the streets, on the trains, in offices, in shops, in teahouses and beer gardens, the talk once more was of fighting and weapons. Passionate discussions on the situation on the northern border, with China threatening to invade because of their humiliation in losing Pol Pot, removed from power in Cambodia by the glorious Vietnamese Army.

And night after night express trains packed with soldiers rumbled through Hanoi on the way to the northern front. Tanks and guns were jammed into freight cars, compartments were filled with young soldiers, and the smell of soldiers' sweat wafted out from train doors and windows. Kien caught the familiar smell of excited fear, of young men soon to be burdened with hardships, bullets and blasting, hunger and cold. This time on the northern border.

"Just like old times, right?" said someone in the crowd close by. "Like in 1965 in the early days against the Americans," the rich city people commented.

"At least we're much stronger compared to those days," others commented, confident of another victory.

Kien listened, thinking they might be right. But he knew it wasn't true that young Vietnamese loved war. Not true at all. If war came they would fight, and fight courageously. But that didn't mean they loved fighting.

No. The ones who loved war were not the young men but the others like the politicians, middle-aged men with fat bellies and short legs. Not the ordinary people. The recent years of war had brought enough suffering and pain to last them a thousand years.

Kien wasn't involved in this new war. For him there had been just the one war, the one which had involved the Americans. That had been the final war as far as he was concerned. It was the one which now determined all events in his life: the happiness, the unhappiness, the joys, the sorrows, the loves, the hatreds.

It was that spring which had begun so sadly, so inauspiciously, with his country once more on the brink of war, when something moved within Kien's

heart, taking him from turmoil to peace. Something inside him, powerful and urgent, pumped life back into his collapsed spirit and snapped life back into him. It felt like love. Perhaps it was recognition of some wonderful truth deep inside him.

That same chilly dark spring night Kien started to write his first novel.

Kien returned home to find Tran Sinh, a former classmate of his and Phuong's, lying in agony. Sinh had been in the hospital for months but had now been sent home to await death. The time to die had come.

Sinh had been home in his first-floor room for two days now, awaiting death. He had joined the army after Kien but was wounded, then demobilized, before Kien. At first, when Sinh returned home, he had not looked like an invalid. He even planned to marry.

But day after day paralysis crept over his body, first traveling down his left leg, then his right, then along his trunk. By the time Kien was demobilized Sinh was walking with the help of a walking-stick, but within a short time his health had deteriorated further and he was confined to his bed. The doctors wondered how he had survived his terrible spinal wound, surprised he had not been killed outright. Instead, Sinh had lived and his suffering had been prolonged. "Incurable," the doctors had said. The more they tried to help him the worse matters became for him and the relatives caring for him, and this unhappy situation continued for four years.

Sinh's parents had died. His brother had married and left. Sinh was left in the room at the end of the corridor on the first floor, a room dark and damp, with its only window facing the toilet. Kien pushed the door open and stepped in. Through the dim light he saw two children and a thin woman, Sinh's sister-in-law, sitting on the floor assembling cartons for the local biscuit factory to earn a little extra money. None of them looked up.

"How is he?" asked Kien, whispering.

"The same," the sister-in-law replied in a tired, bored voice. "Everyone who visits admires him for hanging on so long." She sighed.

The dying man lay on a bamboo bed in the far corner of the room. Kien approached and caught a whiff of an unbearably foul smell. The stench came from the filthy bedclothes.

Sinh's hair had all fallen out, revealing a darkening scalp, dry as old timber. His nose had flattened and his cheeks had collapsed, revealing his teeth and eye-sockets. Kien couldn't guess if Sinh had his eyes open or closed. He leaned over and asked, "Do you recognize me, Sinh?"

"He still recognizes you," interrupted the sister-in-law, "but he can't speak because his lungs have collapsed."

"Can he eat?"

“Yes. But it just flows out the other end.”

Kien sat down on the stool by the bed, not knowing what to say. Sinh could move a little but his desire to live was clearly gone. Fifteen minutes passed, then twenty. If he watched carefully Kien could discern a slight rising and falling of the blankets. The room was still. Now and then the sister-in-law mumbled something about how harshly fate had treated her. Sinh’s brother, sleeping in a loft above Sinh, suddenly began to snore.

Poor Sinh, the poet of the tenth form. What a great pity!

The summer before Kien had visited Sinh in the hospital. He could still move then but his will to live was dwindling. He would sit in his wheelchair and speak with a clear mind, ignoring the certainty of his fate, that he would soon die. He didn’t complain or bemoan his destiny. Above all, he had never made his visitors feel uncomfortable.

Often he would work up enthusiasm and act delighted, smiling all the time at his visitors. He would chat away in his weak voice, speaking of school days and classmates, the pretty girls and the teachers and other matters removed from his present state. He would act as though everything Kien told him was fascinating: “Right, excellent, how could I have forgotten!” And: “Now I remember! How could I have forgotten that!”

Kien had pushed Sinh’s wheelchair out into the hospital’s pretty garden, past some mimosa shrubs in beautiful bloom. The afternoon had been so calm, the air so clean. The sunshine had slanted over the green lawn.

They stopped under the canopy of a spreading *bodhi* tree. “The sun divides the afternoon into halves,” Sinh said, “and the mimosa petals close...See, that’s a poem.” He smiled. “I didn’t dare think of myself as a real poet when I joined the army,” he said. “I hoped to be someone like Le Anh Xuan, our southern hero whose works will endure from this war into the next century. Well, that was my dream. And while I think of it, I must confess I wrote many romantic poems for Phuong and for ages I was afraid you’d find out and beat me up.”

There was nothing to say. The two childhood friends were now in completely different situations in postwar life. After so many years of fighting they were able to speak to each other wordlessly, using the language of their hearts.

Kien saw Sinh back to his ward and said good-bye. He hugged him and kissed his cold thin cheeks.

“Come and see me, sometime,” Sinh called after Kien as he left.

“Please,” he had said, beginning to sob in a rare bout of self-pity. “Sometimes I wish I could kill myself and end everything quickly. War has robbed me of the liberty I deserve. Now, I’m a slave...”

And now, as he sat near the dying Sinh in his bedroom, Kien was choked with emotion. He buried his face in his hands, unable to bear it. He then got

up and ran from the half-bedroom, half-mortuary, without even saying good-bye to the sister-in-law.

Back in his room, his muddy jacket and shoes still on, he lay on his bed and stared at the cracked, yellowing ceiling, his hands behind his head. Hot and painful tears silently ran down his cheeks.

What was to be done? What could be done? He coughed, wanting to moan out loud to ease the pain.

In truth he had been deliriously happy to return home to Hanoi when the war ended. He had spent more than three days traveling on the trans-Vietnam “Unification” troop train after the fall of Saigon. It was a happy feeling, and some soldiers now regarded it as the best days of their army life. Still, there had been some pain even then.

The train was packed with wounded, demobilized soldiers. Knapsacks were jammed together on the luggage racks and in every corner. Hammocks were strung vertically and horizontally all over the compartments, making them look a little like resting stations in the jungle.

At the start, there had been a common emotion of bitterness. There had been no trumpets for the victorious soldiers, no drums, no music. That might have been tolerated, but not the disrespect shown them. The general population just didn’t care about them. Nor did their own authorities.

The railway station scenes were just like afternoon markets, chaotic and noisy.

The authorities checked the soldiers time after time, searching them for loot. Every pocket of their knapsacks had been searched as though the mountain of property that had been looted and hidden after the takeover of the South had been taken only by soldiers.

At every station the loudspeakers blared, blasting the ears of the wounded, the sick, the blind, the mutilated, the white-eyed, grey-lipped malarial troops. Into their ears poured an endless stream of the most ironic of teachings, urging them to ignore the spirit of reconciliation, to beware of the “bullets coated with sugar,” to ignore the warmth and passions among the remnants of this fallen, luxurious society of the South. And especially to guard against the idea of the South having fought valiantly or been meritorious in any way.

But we “meritorious” and victorious soldiers knew how to defend ourselves against this barrage of nonsense. We made fun of the loudspeakers’ admonishments, turning their speeches into jokes, ridiculing them.

By the time we reached the northern Red River Delta areas, where the roads were running alongside us showing the way home to Hanoi, we were all deliriously happy. All the dreams and wishes that had so long been pent up inside suddenly burst from us. Even the most conservative among us

expressed wildly passionate ideas of how they would launch into their new civilian, peacetime lives.

Kien had befriended Hien, a girl soldier from Zone 9 battlefield in the South. She had traveled south in 1966 and been badly wounded in battle. Although her native home was Nam Dinh she had a Ha Tien provincial accent. At night Kien carried her to his hammock and they spent the night together. The rocking of the train set the hammock swinging and despite the cheerful teasing from the soldiers around them they hugged each other and slept together, awakened together, dreamed together, and hugged some more. They kissed hurriedly, sharing the last moments of their uniformed lives, the last kilometers of their battlefield of youth, in passionate embrace.

When the train stopped at her station, Kien helped Hien down from the train. He told her he wanted to leave the train there and take her home, but she laughed and refused.

“That’s enough. Let our stories become ashes now,” she said. “You need to get home, too. Go home as quickly as possible and take care of your house. See if there’s anyone or anything left for you to live for. Maybe someone’s expecting you.”

“Won’t we see each other again?” he asked.

“Who knows? In peacetime anything can happen. Now there’s no war and we’re not soldiers we needn’t make promises to each other. Maybe we’ll meet again, by chance.”

Alone, Hien turned away from him, dragging herself along on crutches, her badly wounded leg swinging uselessly. Her slim body swung from one side to the other gracefully as she moved along, her shoulders raised by the crutches. Just before she went through the crowded platform gate she turned to look at Kien for a last time. Her eyes were sad, but misting over. She staggered a little, nearly losing her balance, then swung determinedly around and went through the gate and out of view.

From there to Hanoi the train’s whistle seemed to sound continuously, saying “Good times, good times, good times,” and the wheels clipping over the rail joints replied, “Happy days, happy days, happy days.” As they neared beautiful old Hanoi Kien was intoxicated by the excitement, as though he’d been lifted to a higher level on a fragrant cloud. Swept up in the fever of anticipation of returning home, his eyes blurred over with tears for a homeward journey he had never dreamed possible.

It was already dark when he arrived at his old home after walking through quiet dark streets from the Hang Co railway station. He stopped and looked at the old building, which itself was also strangely dark; perhaps the families were all asleep. He entered the front yard cautiously, then approached the front door. Perhaps someone had waited up for him, he thought, for the door was unlatched. Surely no one would wait for me. How would they know? But as he began to climb the stairs he felt a dark sense of urgency and his heart

tightened in foreboding.

A pale light shone from a yellowish lamp on the third landing, throwing a dim glow down the corridor. The door to the rooms where he and his father had lived was still the same, with the bronze plaque bearing his father's name. His hands began to shake, then his body, and tears of joy welled up inside him. He stood, swaying gently, fixed to the spot before the door.

Suddenly, another door down the corridor opened and a tall, slim woman wearing a nightgown appeared in the hallway. She stared directly at him, a mute cry in her eyes. *Phuong!*

He was transfixed, confused.

"*Kien!*"

She stepped gently forward, leaning into his arms.

Kien responded, gradually coming to his senses, and bent a little as her smooth arms tightened around his neck.

"*Phuong*, my darling," he murmured as he began kissing her, kisses for ten long years. An unforgettable embrace for each of them, from one heart to the other, an embrace they would remember forever, for nothing so wondrous had touched their lives in those lost years apart.

She gently rubbed her cheek on his lips, then his collar, then his rough army shirt. They whispered urgently to each other. "It's been ten years. Ten years. I was sure I'd never see you again."

"We've each been ghosts in the other's mind," he said.

She continued to murmur, "But from this moment on we'll never be apart, will we, darling?"

Kien tensed a little. A feeling of deep embarrassment began to creep over him, a shadow of concern intruding into his happiness, a feeling of uneasiness that seemed to stem from the supple body he held in his arms.

He tensed. He could hear soft footsteps. Someone was watching them in their embrace.

Phuong, oblivious, began undoing the top button of her nightgown, from which she took a shiny key, slung like a necklace. His eyes blurring, *Kien* unlocked his door and went in. The air, stagnant for several years, flowed out, emerging like a dying gasp.

Kien turned and grasped *Phuong's* arm and began pulling her into his room. He had seen a shadow inside the door of her room and suddenly became brusque. She had not been alone.

Phuong turned pale, her gaze defensive. *Kien* reached down in front of her and picked up his knapsack, then, letting her go, stepped into his room alone and closed the door in her face.

So this was what the peace and happiness would be! The glorious, bright rays of victory, his grand, long-awaited return. So much for his naive faith in the future. He swore: "Wretched man that I am!"

And every time after that when he recalled the first night home of his new postwar life, his heart was wrenched in anguish and bitterness and he would involuntarily moan.

Having stepped into the room and unslung his knapsack he began to pace the room, trying to make sense of the second presence with Phuong. So, the divine war had paid him for all his suffering and losses with more suffering and loss at home. Throughout his years at the front he had dreamed—when he had dreamed of home at all—of little else but the magic moments of return and Phuong, seeing them both in a Utopian dream. He sat down. A succession of images passed through his mind.

Phuong had returned to him later that same night, saying the man she was living with, who had asked her to marry him, had left immediately afterwards because Kien had returned.

How blind they had been back then. Though now he often drowned himself in alcohol, though hundreds of times he pleaded with his inner self to calm down, he was constantly torn with pain recalling the postwar times with Phuong. His life, after ten destructive years of war, had then been punctured by the sharp thorns of love.

Kien's new life with Phuong had broken both their hearts. In hindsight it was a love doomed from the start, doomed from the time he had heard those soft footfalls in her room.

It had ended recently, abruptly, after a fight outside a tavern where Kien had beaten up Phuong's former lover, mauling him badly. The police had been called and Kien had been described by witnesses as "a madman." He had returned home from the police station and met Phuong. He was speechless and distraught.

As Phuong was preparing to leave him she spoke: "We're prisoners to our shared memories of wonderful times together. Those memories won't release us. But we've made a big mistake. I thought we would face just a few small hurdles. But they aren't small, they're as big as mountains."

She reflected: "I should have died that day ten years ago when our train was attacked. At least you'd have remembered me as pure and beautiful. As it is, even though I'm alive, I am a dark chapter in your life. I'm right, aren't I?" Kien remained silent. As she passed out of his life again he made no attempt to stop her.

He had thought then it was for the best, but preserving that attitude was more difficult than he'd imagined. A week went by, then two, then a month. He became increasingly restless, unable to concentrate, or even to turn up at the university. He sat uncomfortably, unable to relax or plan his days properly.

He lived on the razor's edge. Whenever he heard high heels tapping on the stairs his heart would stop. But it was never Phuong.

Kien took to staring out of his window for hours on end, then walking the

dark streets, now and then looking back in hope. On bad nights he would lose control altogether and break down, sobbing into his pillow. Yet he knew that if she returned to him both of them would suffer again.

His room began to get colder as the winter pressed in. He stood by the window one cold night, missing Phuong as usual, as he watched the slow drizzling rain, slanting with the northeast wind. Scenes from the northern battlefield began forming before him and he saw once again the Ngoc Bo Ray peaks and the woods of the Screaming Souls. Then each man in his platoon reappeared before him in the room. By what magic was this happening to him? After the horrible slaughter which had wiped out his battalion, how could he see them all again? The air in his room felt strange, vibrating with images of the past. Then it shook, shuddering under waves of hundreds of artillery shells pouring into the Screaming Souls Jungle, and the walls of the room shook noisily as the jets howled in on their bombing runs. Startled, Kien jumped back from the window.

Bewildered, confused, deeply troubled, he began to pace around the room away from the window. The memories flared up, again and again. He lurched over to his desk and picked up his pen, then almost mechanically began to write.

All through the night he wrote, a lone figure in this untidy, littered room where the walls peeled, where books and newspapers and rubbish packed shelves and corners of the floor, where empty bottles were strewn and where the broken wardrobe was now cockroach-infested. Even the bed with its torn mosquito net and blanket was a mess. In this derelict room he wrote frantically, nonstop, with a sort of divine inspiration, knowing this might be the only time he would feel this urge.

He wrote, cruelly reviving the images of his comrades, of the mortal combat in the jungle that became the Screaming Souls, where his battalion had met its tragic end. He wrote with hands numbed by the cold, trembling with the fury of his endeavor, his lungs suffocating with cigarette smoke, his mouth dry and his breath foul, as all around him the men fought and fell, one by one, with loud painful screams, amidst loud exploding shells, among thunderclaps from the rockets pouring down from the helicopter gunships.

One by one they fell in that battle in that room, until the greatest hero of them all, a soldier who had stayed behind enemy lines to harass the enemy's withdrawal, was blown into a small tattered pile of humanity on the edge of a trench.

The next morning, rays from the first day of spring shone through to the darkest corner of his room.

Kien arose, wearily trudging away from the house and out along the pavement, a lonely-looking soul wandering in the beautiful sunshine. The

tensions of the tumultuous night had left him yet still he felt unbalanced, an eerie feeling identical to that which beset him after being wounded for the first time.

Coming around after losing consciousness he had found himself in the middle of the battlefield, bleeding profusely. But this was the beautiful, calm Nguyen Du Street, and there was the familiar Thuyen Quang lake from his childhood. Familiar but not quite the same, for after that long, mystical night everything now seemed changed. Even his own soul; he felt a stranger unto himself. Even the clouds floating in from the northeast seemed to be dyed a different color, and just below the skyline Hanoi's old grey roofs seemed to sparkle in the sunshine as though just sprinkled with water.

For that whole Sunday Kien wandered the streets in a trance, feeling a melancholy joy, like dawn mixed with dusk. He believed he had been born again, and the bitterness of his recent postwar years faded. Born again into the prewar years, to resurrect the deep past within him, and this would continue until he had relived a succession of his life and times; the first new life was to be that of his distant past. His lost youth, before the sorrow of war.

He went to a park that afternoon, ambling along uneven rocky paths lined with grass and flowers, brushing past shrubs still wet with rain. Coming to an empty bench near a lovers' lane, he sat for hours just listening to the quiet wind blowing over the lake as he gazed into the distance, far beyond the horizons of thought to the harmonious fields of the dead and living, of unhappiness and happiness, of regret and hope. The immense sky, the pungent perfume from the beautiful new spring, and a melodic sadness that seemed to play on the waves of the lake combined to conjure up within his spiritual space images of a past, previously inexplicable life.

He saw himself in a long-ago distant landscape, and from that other images and memories revived and he sat silently reviewing his past.

Memories of a midday in the dry season in beautiful sunshine, flowers in radiant blossom in the tiny forest clearing; memories also of a difficult rainy day by the flooded Sa Thay river when he had to go into the jungle collecting bamboo shoots and wild turnips. Memories of riverbanks, wild grass plots, deserted villages, beloved but unknown female figures who gave rise to tender nostalgia and the pain of love. An accumulation of old memories, of silent pictures as sharp as a mountain profile and as dense as deep jungle. That afternoon, not feeling the rising evening wind, he had sat and allowed his soul to take off on its flight to his eternal past.

Months passed. The novel seemed to have its own logic, its own flow. It seemed from then on to structure itself, to take its own time, to make its own detours. As for Kien, he was just the writer; the novel seemed to be in charge and he meekly accepted that, mixing his own fate with that of his heroes,

passively letting the stream of his novel flow as it would, following the course of some mystical logic set by his memory or imagination.

From that winter's night when he began to write, the flames of memory led Kien deep into a labyrinth, through circuitous paths, and back out again into primitive jungles of the past. Again seeing the Sa Thay, Ascension Pass, the Screaming Souls Jungle, Crocodile Lake, like dim names from hell. Then the novel drifted towards the MIA team gathering the remains, making a long trail linking the soldiers' graves scattered all over the mountains of the North and Central Highlands; this process of recalling his work in gathering remains had breathed new energy into each page of his novel.

And into the stories went also the atmosphere of the dark jungle with its noxious scents, and legends and myths about the lives of the ordinary soldiers whose very deaths provided the rhythm for his writing.

Yet only a few of his heroes would live from the opening scenes through to the final pages, for he witnessed and then described them trapped in murderous firefights, in fighting so horrible that everyone involved prays to Heaven they'll never have to experience any such terror again. Where death lay in wait, then hunted and ambushed them. Dying and surviving were separated by a thin line; they were killed one at a time, or all together; they were killed instantly, or were wounded and bled to death in agony; they could live but suffer the nightmares of white blasts which destroyed their souls and stripped their personalities bare.

Kien had perhaps watched more killings and seen more corpses than any other contemporary writer. He had seen rows of youthful American soldiers, their bodies unscathed, leaning shoulder to shoulder in trenches and dugouts, sleeping an everlasting sleep because artillery barrages had blocked their exit, sucking life from them. Parachutists still in their camouflaged uniforms lying near bushes around a landing zone in the Ko Leng forest, burning in the hot noonday sun, with only hawks above and flies below to covet their bodies. And a rain of arms and legs dropping before him onto the grass by the Sa Thay river during a night raid by B-52s. Hamburger Hill after three days of bloody fighting, looking like a domed roof built with corpses. A soldier stepping onto a mine and being blown to the top of a tree, as if he had wings. Kien's deaths had more shapes, colors, and reality of atmosphere than anyone else's war stories. Kien's soldiers' stories came from beyond the grave and told of their lives beyond death.

"There is no terrible hell in death," he had once read. "Death is another life, a different kind than we know here. Inside death one finds calm, tranquillity, and real freedom..."

To Kien dead soldiers were more shadowy yet sometimes more significant than the living. They were lonely, tranquil, and hopeful, like illusions. Sometimes the dead manifested themselves as sounds rather than shadows. Others in the MIA team gathering bodies in the jungles said they'd heard the

dead playing musical instruments and singing. They said at the foot of Ascension Pass, deep inside the ancient forest, the ageless trees whispered along with a song that merged into harmony with an ethereal guitar, singing, “*O victorious years and months, O endless suffering and pain...*”

A nameless song with a ghostly rhythm, simple and mysterious, that everyone had heard, yet each said they’d heard different versions. They said they listened to it every night and were finally able to follow the voice trail to where the singer was buried. They found a body wrapped in canvas in a shallow grave, its bones crumbled. Alongside the bones lay a hand-made guitar, intact.

True or not? Who’s to know? But the story went on to say that when the bones were lifted to be placed in a grave, all those present heard the song once more echoing through the forest. After the burial the song ended and was never heard again.

The yarn became folklore. For every unknown soldier, for every collection of MIA remains, there was a story.

Kien recalled the Mo Rai valley by the Sa Thay where his group found a half-buried coffin. It had popped up like a termite hill on a riverbank, so high even the floods hadn’t reached it. Inside the coffin was a thick plastic bag, similar to those the Americans used for their dead, but this one was clear plastic. The soldier seemed to be still breathing, as though in a deep sleep. He looked so alive. His handsome, youthful face had a serious air and his body appeared to be still warm, clothed in a uniform that was still in good condition.

Then before their eyes the plastic bag discolored, whitening as though suddenly filled with smoke. The bag glowed and something seemed to escape from it, causing the bag to deflate. When the smoke cleared, only a yellowish ash remained.

Kien and his platoon were astounded and fell to their knees around it, raising their hands to heaven praying for a safe flight for the departed soul. Overhead a flock of geese, flying solemnly and peacefully in formation, winged their way past.

“If you can’t identify them by name we’ll be burdened by their deaths for the rest of our lives,” the head of the MIA team had said. He had been an insurance clerk at one time. Now his entire life was gathering corpses. He was preoccupied with this sole duty, which was to locate, identify, recover, then bury the dead soldiers. He used to describe his work as though it were a sacred oath, and ask others to swear their dedication.

An oath was hardly necessary for Kien or the others in the MIA team. They’d emerged from the war full of respect and mourning for the unfortunate dead, named and nameless alike.

One of Kien's scouts was Phan, a native of Hai Hung province. He told Kien this story: "I don't know who he was because he was from the ARVN Special Commandos, on the other side. Anyway, during one fierce battle during the rainy season this guy's company and mine became entangled in a very bloody fight. Rivers of blood; no winner, no loser, both battered. The Americans backed these ARVN units up with artillery from the top of a hill, and when the artillery stopped the Phantoms came in and bombed us. I dropped into a bomb crater and escaped the big bombs. Then came the baby bombs, exploding nonstop.

"I lay there not moving and then this guy jumped in on me, heavy as a log. I was so frightened I stabbed him twice in the chest through his camouflage uniform, then once more in the belly, then again in the neck. He cried in pain and writhed around convulsing, his eyes rolling. I realized then he'd already been badly wounded before jumping in. His own artillery had blown his foot off and he was bleeding all over, even from the mouth. His hands were trying to hold in his intestines, which were spilling out of his belly and steaming. I didn't know what to do. He was so pitiful. I pushed his guts back into his belly and tore my shirt off to bandage him, but it was so hard to stop the bleeding.

"If it had been anyone else, not someone so strong and healthy, he would have died right then. But this guy just moaned louder and louder, tears running down his cheeks. I was horrified and at the same time felt deep pity for him.

"So when the raid stopped I jumped out of the crater, telling him to stay there for a while. 'I'm going to find some cloth and bandages,' I told him. 'I'll be back soon.'

"He blinked at me, the rain pouring down his face, mixing water, tears, and blood. Outside the crater the jungle was destroyed, with trees broken and the ground devastated. Troops from both sides had withdrawn so I searched for a while and found a bag with emergency medical equipment in it, then turned to go back to help him.

"But I'd been silly. By then it was dark and I had no idea where the crater was. The trees around me had been broken off and branches scattered all around the place. The ground was pockmarked with hundreds of craters. Where was the one I'd been sharing with the Saigonese? Darkness fell, the heavy rain continued and the water flowed in small streams down the slopes. 'Hey, Saigon, Saigon, hey!' I called, running around trying to find him. I fell into a crater. The water came over my knees. That meant that someone sitting inside a crater would now have water up to his chest.

"The more I tried to find him the worse the situation became. All I did was exhaust myself. When dawn at last came and the rain eased, you wouldn't believe what I saw. Horrifying. All the bomb craters were filled to the rim with water.

"I pushed off. I was going a little mad. I began to imagine his death: water slowly rising on him, a barbaric death stuck in the mud, helpless as the water came over his belly, his chest, his shoulders, his chin, his lips, then reached his nostrils...and he started to drown. He'd died still hoping desperately that I'd come back and save him, as I promised. In which crater had he died?"

"Now, even after many years, whenever I see a flood I feel a sharp pang in my heart and think of my cruel stupidity. No human being deserved the torture I left him to suffer."

After many years of peace Phan was still tormented by the memory. Would the drowned man ever stop floating through his mind?

The sorrow of war inside a soldier's heart was in a strange way similar to the sorrow of love. It was a kind of nostalgia, like the immense sadness of a world at dusk. It was a sadness, a missing, a pain which could send one soaring back into the past. The sorrow of the battlefield could not normally be pinpointed to one particular event, or even one person. If you focused on any one event it would soon become a tearing pain.

It was especially important, therefore, to avoid if possible focusing on the dead.

However, Kien would remember, until the last moments of his life, his first commander, Quang. In the dry season of 1966 during the Sa Thay campaign, Kien was a novice, fighting for the first time. For three days and nights fighting against the Air Cavalry, Kien followed Quang closely. He was led, helped, and in reality protected. Standing, lying down, rolling away, moving forward, running, Kien was linked with Quang. Then suddenly Quang had been chopped down, hit when the company was crossing a bamboo thicket near Hill 300 to get within range of the American troops who had dropped from helicopters.

Quang had been hit by a shell exploding right at his feet, blasting him into the air, then plummeting him back to earth. Kien knelt clumsily beside his commander but didn't know how to help him. Quang's belly was torn open, his intestines pouring out, but the frightening thing was that all his bones seemed to be smashed.

His two sides had been flattened somehow and one arm had been torn from his shoulder. Amazingly, Quang was unconscious for only a brief time. Perhaps because he was in so much pain he regained consciousness quickly. He had been a fisherman in Mong Cai, was extremely strong and healthy, well-built and tough, as well as kind-hearted. He was usually brave and silent but now he screamed: "Don't touch me, don't! Don't bandage me any more, aaaahhhh!"

Kien had been trying to bandage Quang's thighs.

"Stop! Stop, please!" he sobbed, and blood ran from the corners of his mouth. He lay still for a moment, then moved his head and opened his eyes. "Kien, Kiiieeen, shoot me!" he said. "Shoot!"

The jungle reverberated with artillery fire. Noisy shouts echoed through the smoke. Kien trembled desperately, but kept on trying to bandage Quang. While trying his best he fervently hoped Quang would faint and be free of the horrible pain—his pain was even torturing Kien. It seemed death itself was forcing Quang to stay conscious a little longer, to prolong the cruel torture.

Then even more artillery rounds came in from the enemy, with one shell exploding near them and burying them with earth, making it even more difficult for Kien to help Quang. Miraculously, Quang had lived through the second blast.

Blood flowed from his mouth and blood bubbled through his nose as he breathed. His eyes were wide open, as though he wanted to say something. Kien bent closer to listen: “If you pity me please don’t let me go on like this. I can’t stand the pain. My bones are smashed, my guts spilled...” His voice was barely a tiny whisper, yet it was clear and he spoke firmly: “Let me die. Just one shot. Please...”

Then with unexpected speed Quang summoned his remaining strength and reached with his one good arm for a grenade, then held it up.

“Got it!” he said loudly, almost cheerfully triumphant. He then began to laugh a ghastly laugh.

Kien looked on in alarm as Quang shouted to him, “Get out quick, Kien. Go! Out of here! Get out!”

As Kien started to move he heard Quang’s ghoulish laughter. He jumped up and began to back away, his eyes on the grenade’s detonator. Swiftly he turned and ran as Quang’s crazed laughter followed him.

Nine years later one of Kien’s MIA team said he had heard crazed laughter echoing from Hill 300, on the other side of the Sa Thay. Kien listened as the nervous man gave his version.

“I think it came from the jungle monster the Trieng people talk about,” said the soldier.

“Anyway, I’m sure it wasn’t a human laugh because it was shaking and choking. It didn’t last long but I froze in my tracks. Looking around a bit, I found a small grass clearing and then a little hut. I could smell something burning, like barbecued cassava, so it meant there were human beings there. Near the hut I saw a hairy figure, someone with very long hair and a beard, sitting naked on a log staring right at the place where I was hiding.

“Then I saw a grenade in his hand, would you believe it? I crawled backwards, but as I did I brushed a few leaves and the man must have heard it because he stood up, looked my way, and stepped forward. I jumped up then ran away, and as I ran he started that horrible laughter again and followed me.”

“Perhaps it was the Forest Man,” said another, remembering the local folklore.

“Why would the Forest Man have a grenade? And he isn’t supposed to live in a hut. And would the Forest Man laugh like that?” the young soldier replied.

“Maybe it was Tung. What do you think, Kien?”

“Tung who?” asked Kien.

“Crazy Tung. The guardsman, don’t you remember? He went crazy and left us in the jungle when we were based near Crossroad 90 in 1971. That’s quite close to that area.”

“Oh, that Tung, I remember now. Maybe you’re right. He used to laugh and laugh when he had his mad crises and he gave everyone the shivers.”

The ghost-talk went on. Some said there were ghostly streams in the jungle where those who drank the water began immediately to suffer all sorts of diseases, including mental illness. But they remembered that Tung’s illness had been caused by a bomb fragment penetrating his brain. At least that’s what the regimental doctor had said.

Kien remembered their headquarters had been bombed and many soldiers killed and wounded. Tung appeared to escape unscathed, except for a terrible headache. The nurse gave him aspirin but that seemed to make it worse.

Then suddenly one night Tung’s laughter had sounded through all the huts. Yes, that hadn’t been far from here. Tung cleared out, and although many tried to track him down and bring him back he skillfully avoided his trackers.

After several weeks there was still no trace of Tung. The soldiers began saying the bomb fragment had zigzagged around in his head, leading the craziness into all corners of his skull, making him crazy in several different ways.

Still, listening to the story of Tung, Kien could hardly concentrate. All he could think of was Quang’s death and his laughter and the grenade, nine years ago. It seemed to the soldiers talking about these mystical happenings that intense physical pain could mingle with the earth and grow into the trees in the jungle. Such desperate tragedies might create those ghostly sounds, sounds that would be heard forever, re-creating the agonies of the past.

It was around this time that Kien began to drift over the edge from logic and started believing in ghosts. Ghosts in the winds from hell and in the mystical occurrences in the deep and gloomy jungle.

Kien and his MIA team finally decided to investigate the hut where the long-haired man had been seen. As they approached they heard a howl of laughter, coarse chuckles and roars, as though they were warning calls trying to prevent them prying.

“Who are you?” Kien called. “We’re your friends,” he added, hoping to entice them out.

There was no reply. Only the sounds of a creek running down from Hill 300.

The jungle was still. "The war is over," Kien shouted. "It's peace. No war. You can come out!" he added.

The reply was a long peal of hysterical laughter which made the hair on their necks stand on end. Laughter? Or simply the howl of a lunatic? The barbaric moaning echoed on and on, the sounds clashing as though more than one voice was calling.

The MIA team waited patiently until the noises stopped, then moved towards the hut. Kien and the team felt rather than saw shadows flit from the rear of the hut into the jungle. From the top of a tree near the grass clearing they heard a bird call sharply as the grass parted below the tree.

"Look!" someone shouted.

At the edge of the clearing where the bamboo jungle began, a ghostly figure was seen momentarily. Long hair flying. Then another bent-over shadowy figure running along behind the first. Illusion and reality mixed with each other as the figures merged with the dark green jungle backdrop.

The MIA team were amazed. They left a can of rice, salt, and medicines in the hut, hoping to help. But when they returned a few days later the rice and the medicine were still there, untouched. "They might think it's a trap," said one of the team.

"They? That means you're sure they're human?" said one who felt they'd been ghosts.

"Look," said Kien picking up a comb. It had been fashioned from a piece of aluminium, probably from a crashed plane. Long hair was still in the comb.

"Well, they aren't ghosts. Or Forest Men," one said.

"But who are they? Ours? Deserters? Or Saigonese?"

No one had an answer.

For weeks after that the team kept a sharp eye out for the hut-dwellers, but not once were they seen. Once some laughter was heard, and another time one of them had seen a woman bathing in the river at dusk. When he approached she turned and burst into ghoulish laughter and fled, into the bush or into the reeds on the edge of the stream.

"Maybe the other one's gone and ditched her," said one soldier. "I wouldn't be surprised if she's carrying a baby."

In this way they mulled over the mysterious figures. The one who spoke of the baby was hoping this unfathomable story would be made less tragic by adding an air of hope, perhaps even a happy ending. Including a baby somehow made it sound better.

He went on: "The mental illness wouldn't affect the baby. He'd grow up, people would find him, or maybe he would find people by himself," he suggested.

"We have to hope so," another said, now taking the baby for granted.

"Well, let's hope so. There must be a lot of them around here like this, not

to mention the more horrible stories. The dead ones left behind, for example,” another said.

“That’s right! The dead ones, too,” another chimed in. “They must also have a certain salvation.”

That’s right, said Kien to himself as he listened to these ramblings. After all these, we are the ones who are now confused and mired in shame. We are the ones who’ve become totally alienated. But we won’t be like this forever. There must be some way out for us. But when?

As the novel continued to unfold on the cluttered desk in his Hanoi room, more stories came back to him. Flashes like film reels of events he had not thought about even once since they occurred.

Saigon, 30 April, Victory Day. It was pouring rain. Yes, on that momentous day of total victory, after that terribly hot noon, Saigon had been drenched in rain. After the downpour the sun came out from behind the clouds and the gunsmoke.

The last counterattack by the ARVN commandos at Tan Son Nhat airport was beaten off and Kien’s troops moved in from the edge of the main runway. Kien dragged himself over to the airport lounge to find his regiment.

Of the entire scout platoon sent into the airport, only he had survived.

In the city five kilometers away the anti-aircraft guns were being fired noisily in celebration. But here it remained strangely quiet. Smoke continued to billow from oil fires, but the air had been cooled and soothed by the rain, creating a sleepy atmosphere. All around the airport the victorious troops were enjoying their greatest prize: sleep.

Kien lurched tiredly past a row of ARVN bodies, commandos in uniforms still wet from the rain, and stepped onto the polished granite stairs of the terminal. Everywhere soldiers were lying deeply asleep. They lay sprawled on tables, on bars, on benches, on window ledges, and in armchairs. The chorus of snores made Kien sleepy, too. He sat himself down by the door to the customs office and lit a cigarette. After a few minutes the cigarette dropped from his fingers and he slid to the ground into a deep sleep.

He was awakened a short time later by noises, the heat of a fire, and the smell of food. Next to him a group of armored-car soldiers were burning mattresses and polished wooden railings from the bar. They were cooking something in a huge pot. It smelled delicious.

“Smells good, don’t it?” one of them said to Kien. “Have some. Down here they call them instant noodles.”

Another soldier interrupted: “Goddammit, be quick, so we can get looking. Fuck it, if we aren’t quick the fucking infantry’ll get all the good stuff. Oh, sorry,” he said to Kien, “you’re infantry. Well, you’d probably know where

the post-office storeroom is.”

“I know where it is,” Kien replied.

“Excellent. After we’ve had the noodles, take us there. I’ve got an empty armored car out there and I’ve not had any souvenirs for ages.”

Then he looked disdainfully at Kien. “Shit, don’t you know you’ve been sleeping next to a corpse? Couldn’t you smell her?”

Kien slowly turned his head to see where he’d been sleeping. A naked woman, her breasts firm and standing upright, her legs stretched out and open like scissors, her long hair covering her face, was stretched out near him, blocking the entry to the customs office. She looked young. Her eyes were half-closed. No blood was visible.

“I was so tired I didn’t notice her. I’ll drag her away,” said Kien.

“Leave her. Just don’t touch her. Now the war’s finished it’ll be bad luck for us to touch a corpse.”

“I wonder why she’s naked,” said Kien.

“Beats me. We’d just shot those bastards over there and when we came in she was already lying there like that.”

“Strange. The commandos are already stinking, yet she’s still fresh. Maybe women are cleaner, so their bodies don’t rot as quickly,” said Kien.

“Shut up! Gabbing on about stinking corpses while we’re trying to eat.”

Behind them they heard the customs door swing open and a crashing noise. They turned to see a huge helmeted soldier tripping over the girl’s body and dropping a crate of Saigon 33 beer. The bottles scattered and broke, spreading the amber fluid all over the floor. The armored-car crew just laughed.

But the big soldier, embarrassed, got up and kicked at the body angrily, screaming at the dead girl: “You fucking prostitute, lying there showing it for everyone to see. Dare trip me up, damn your ancestors! To hell with you!”

Enraged, he grabbed the corpse by one leg and dragged her across the floor and down the stairs. Her skull thudded down the steps like a heavy ball. When he reached the concrete floor at the bottom of the stairs, he braced himself, lifted the dead girl, and threw her out into the sunshine next to another pile of dead southern commandos. The body bounced up, her arms spread wide, and her mouth opened as if she was about to cry out. Her head dropped back with another thud on the concrete. The lout walked away jauntily, swinging his arms as if he were a hero.

The armored-car crew had stopped eating, stiffened, and watched in silence. After the lout walked away they rose and went into the yard. The leader raised his AK and started to aim at the big man. “Damn you!” he shrieked.

But Kien rushed over and pushed the barrel of the gun up. As he did so the soldier began firing, but the bullets went skyward and fell harmlessly to earth around them.

“Just because of that you wanted to kill him?” Kien asked the armored-car

commander.

They looked around them. The whole airport was full of officers and soldiers alike running as though they were in a marketplace. They were looting, destroying, and firing rifles into the air at random. No one had paid any attention to the scene with the corpse. Even the lout hadn't realized he'd come within a whisker of being shot.

The soldier wrenched his gun back from Kien, staring at Kien with loathing and hatred.

"Maybe she was an important officer," Kien said to the soldier, as though that would justify the treatment of her body.

"Shut up," the soldier replied.

"What?"

"Shut up. You're talking garbage," he said, narrowing his eyes and spoiling for a fight.

The armored-car commander's men gathered around them. "Drop it, you two. Forget it. Today's V-Day, have you forgotten?"

The men took down curtains from the airport lounge and began to wrap the bodies up. They found some pretty clothes in a suitcase and dressed the dead girl, combing her hair into a bun and washing her face. They carried all the bodies out and laid them in a row to wait for the body truck to take them away.

"That's it. Farewell to one regime," Kien shouted.

The armored-car crew took off their caps and stood to attention.

The commander, calm by now, apologized to Kien. "Sorry for the outburst. It's just that we're fed up with corpses. We've had human flesh in the armored-car tracks and we've had to drive through rivers to wash the bits off and wash away the stink. But I just couldn't watch that asshole treating a body like that, and a woman, too. If you hadn't stopped me I'd have shot him and been nailed as a murderer, and that would have been senseless. We weren't any better, sleeping and eating by the corpse."

"That's enough," said Kien.

"No. I mean it. That slob gave us a sort of warning: Don't criticize others. Be sure of yourself first."

Kien frowned, then walked away. "Be sure of yourself first, what a joke!" Kien said to himself. He recalled Oanh's death a month earlier, the morning his regiment attacked the police headquarters at Buon Me Thuot.

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That day the southern government's police force had defended themselves as staunchly as any regular soldiers in the southern armed forces. It took the NVA regulars more than an hour to fight their way into the main police

building. They'd been ordered to kill all men wearing white shirts and release those wearing yellow. No one knew who'd given the order but it went down the ranks by word of mouth. The attackers fired nonstop, yet the white shirts continued to pour out like bees.

In the leading force, Kien and Oanh had just taken out the machine gunners who'd been firing on them from the third floor. They had rushed up the hallway, throwing a grenade into each room they came to. The defenders were using pistols, machine guns, and grenades to fight back and refused to surrender.

Kien and Oanh got to a room at the end of the third-floor corridor. It had a plush brown door lined with leather. The door was flung open before they got to it and three figures like white blurs flashed past them and rushed upstairs to the fourth floor.

"They're women! Don't shoot," shouted Oanh.

But Kien's AK had already sounded. Kien stopped shooting and shouted, "Surrender and you live. Resist and you're dead!"

But he had already shot the three uniformed women and they fell back down the stairs onto the green corridor's green carpet. Dark red blood spurted from two of them onto the carpet, while the third, just a girl really, slumped at the base of the stairs against a wall.

Kien and Oanh ran over to her. The air was full of gunsmoke and the smell of blood, yet the young girl's perfume seemed stronger. She was cradling her face in her hands, her curled hair almost covering them. Between her hands they could see smeared lipstick and her lips twisted in pain. The whole building was in chaos and all around them were grenade explosions, gunshots, screams, and footsteps.

Kien moved past the girl, heading upstairs, and Oanh said to the girl, "Go down into the yard with your hands up. No one will shoot you." Oanh picked up his knapsack of grenades and slung them over his shoulder as though they were avocados, and started after Kien.

Kien didn't hear the shots that killed Oanh.

With all the machine-gun fire and other noises he didn't even hear Oanh's cry as the girl shot him. He didn't realize that he had barely escaped death himself because her Walther PK38 had run out of bullets.

She had shot Oanh in the back several times and Oanh was falling as Kien, completely unaware of her shots, turned to lean against the wall and wait for him. He was about to tell Oanh not to rush out onto the fourth floor, but to use a grenade to threaten them first.

As Oanh fell the girl lifted the pistol in both hands, bending slightly forward, and aimed at Kien. He was less than ten meters from her and knew he would be hit. She pulled the trigger, but nothing happened.

Kien shot her then, coming down the stairs past Oanh, shooting repeatedly,

until he stood face to face and shot her again, in revenge. But although she had been blasted back by five rounds she still leaned on her arm on the floor, raising her head, as if she had decided to sit up. Kien fired the remainder of the magazine into her and the tiles under the girl's white uniform reddened with blood. Kien squatted down near the four bodies, shaking and retching. In ten long years of fighting, since his first day at the front, he had never felt as bad.

That day at the airport he had recalled Oanh's fate as he walked around reviling the armored-car commander's advice to treat the dead sympathetically. Oanh had been sympathetic, and look what had happened to him.

Kien began drinking. There was plenty of free booze at the airport. He wandered around watching the soldiers looting, and joined in the drinking and destruction. The entertainment seemed riotous, but it wasn't the least bit amusing. They turned over furniture, smashed and ripped fittings and scattered them everywhere. Glasses, pots, cups, wine bottles, were all broken or shot up. They used machine guns to shoot out the chandeliers and the ceiling lights. Everyone drank heavily and they all seemed to be drunk, half-laughing, half-crying. Some were yelling like madmen.

Peace had rushed in brutally, leaving them dazed and staggering in its wake. They were more amazed than happy with the peace.

Kien sat in the canteen of the Air France terminal, his legs up on a table, quietly drinking. One after another he downed the cups of brandy, the way a barbarian would, as if to insult life. Many of those around him had passed out, but he just kept on drinking.

A strange and horrible night.

At times the noise of machine guns and the sight of the red, blue, and violet signal flares fired into the air at random created a surreal atmosphere. It was like an apocalypse, then an earthquake. Kien shuddered, sensing the end of an era.

Some said they had been fighting for thirty years, if you included the Japanese and the French. He had been fighting for ten years. War had been their whole world. So many lives, so many fates. The end of the fighting was like the deflation of an entire landscape, with fields, mountains, and rivers collapsing in on themselves.

As dawn approached it grew noisier, then the racket died down.

Kien felt the sharp contrast between the loud, chaotic night and the peaceful morning. Suddenly, he felt terribly alone; he sensed he would be lonely forever.

In later years, when he heard stories of V-Day or watched the scenes of the

fall of Saigon on film, with cheering, flags, flowers, triumphant soldiers, and joyful people, his heart would ache with sadness and envy. He and his friends had not felt that soaring, brilliant happiness he saw on film. True, in the days following 30 April he had experienced unforgettable joys after the victory. But on the night itself they'd had that suffocating feeling at the airport. And why not? They'd just stepped out of their trenches.

Yes, he had drunk his way through the night sitting in the Air France lounge. It wasn't until morning that his brain started reeling. He began to have nightmares about the naked girl they'd dressed up. The floor beneath him felt as though it was heaving, a glass wall before him seemed to go up in smoke. The apparition of a naked girl appeared before him, her chest white, her hair messy, her dark eyes swarming with ants, and on her lips a terrible twisted smile. He looked steadily at her, feeling pity. This was a human being who had been killed and humiliated, someone even he had looked down on. Those who had died and those who lived on shared a common fate in this war.

He reached out unsteadily and tried to embrace the ghostly shadow of the girl. In his drunkenness he was blubbering, generating deep pity for her poor lost soul as he blethered on with words of consolation for her.

When he spoke of these events in later life, others found it inconceivable he would waste his time becoming nostalgic over a girl at Tan Son Nhat airport who had not only been a corpse but the corpse of someone Kien had never met! Yet the woman had, strangely, left a tragic and indelible imprint on his mind. She became the last of his enduring obsessions.

The manuscript pages were heaped in random order in the mute girl's attic quarters. These flimsy pages represented Kien's past; the lines told stories that were sometimes clear, but most were at best obscure and as vague and pale as twilight. They told stories from the precariously fine border dividing life from death, blurring the line itself and finally erasing it. Ages and times were mixed in confusion, as were peace and war.

The conflicts continued from the lines on pages into the real life of the author; the fighting refused to die.

The personalities, both alive and dead, breathed and spoke to the author in his special world where everyone he had known still lived and walked and smiled and ate and joked and dreamed and loved.

The mute girl might have said the author's craziest pages came when he was most unhappy; it was then he wrote part funereally, part insanely because of his insistent passion for life. That's what she might have said.

But she could not speak at all. That was the one last enigma bequeathed to

us by the author. The mute girl had no way to express herself, for she neither read nor wrote properly and of course could not speak.

She had opened a place in her heart and permanently reserved it for the author. When he had gone, the manuscript took his place in her heart. While she had his story she nurtured the hope of having him back.

She had moved into the apartment block several years before, during the war, when the roof was in disrepair.

Many years had elapsed since Kien's father had died, leaving the attic empty. Because of his ghastly paintings, superstitious folk said that a ghost had moved in. Perhaps it was an excuse not to fix the roof. In any case, the girl moved in quietly one day, and because she could not speak and because no one else wanted to go there, she remained apart from the others in the block of apartments.

Before getting close to Kien she had passed him several times on the narrow stairways. He had stretched his lips in artificial smiles that told her he was being polite and that he was drunk and would never remember her.

Kien himself wrote about her. That is how her story came to be among those pages that were found later. He wrote of her in the first person, then in the third. Passionately; dispassionately. This is what we pieced together:

She saw him as tall, broad in the shoulders, but thin and pale. His face was wrinkled, full of character, but he was often sad and tired.

When she first started to observe him she divined that the beautiful girl in the apartment next to his had been his lover, but was now shunning him.

She also knew that he was a writer. She would lip-read people saying it as he walked the streets. They called him "The Sorrowful One" and nicknames like that, but there was pride in their name-calling.

By that special gift which people deprived of normal senses develop, she also divined he was gradually becoming interested in her. She had no idea why; perhaps it was nothing but curiosity. Most people had a hidden curiosity about the handicapped. But not him, she decided. This was different.

Then, late one quiet, warm summer night, he knocked on her door. And knocked again, the way a friend who expected to be answered would persist. From inside, she could smell alcohol. She hesitated. She was cautious, yet not afraid. In fact, she was a brave girl in many quiet ways. So she opened the door.

"Arumm..." he said. It wasn't a greeting, nor was it an excuse for calling near midnight. She stepped back and opened the door wider and he stepped through as though he'd been expected.

He had been expected. For many weeks, she suddenly realized, she had been waiting for him. She smiled and signaled to him to sit down.

Kien staggered a little and brushed heavily against the cane chair she offered him, tipping it over. He waved the accident aside and flopped down on

her bed. She righted the cane chair and placed it near her table, signaling him to move into it. "Doan be 'fraid," she lip-read him saying in slurred words.

His face was distorted by the drink, but he was kind and friendly. She offered him some herbal tea, which he accepted and gulped down.

The tea sobered him slightly. He stood up and slowly walked around the room. As he spoke she realized for the first time he had been in her room hundreds of times; this had been his father's studio.

To win his confidence, and to see his lips more clearly, she sat next to him. "People say there are ghosts here. That's not true. It's them, the ones from my father's paintings. Before his death he released them from his canvases...a crazy and barbarous ceremony. No paintings left now..."

She couldn't quite understand, but as she looked over his shoulder she saw his shadow on the wall and imagined him to be his father sitting at an easel and painting obsessively.

"And then you came," he said clearly. "You aren't afraid. Who are you?" But then he rambled off again. He grasped her hand tightly. "I've got you in my novel. Understand? You've helped me remember. Right now I need to remember. Everything. To remember this attic, everything."

She let him talk. Drunks needed to be free. She let him hold her hand tightly, twist it, until her own hand was hurting and a little swollen. He finally stopped talking and rested his head on the table. But still he held her hand. She was so tired, yet she did not try to free her hand from his.

Weeks passed without her seeing him again, though every night she could see a light at his window.

It was a light she looked for now. But was he there?

Then one day she met him at the front gate to the apartments. He had the appearance of someone returning from a long journey. He looked thinner and older and a little absent-minded. She was deeply hurt as he brushed past her, his eyes registering no recognition. Surely he had not forgotten her? Had he shuffled her aside because she was a mute?

No. A few nights later he reappeared. He was both as friendly and as distant as he had been on the first night. And there were many more visits. He came when he was drunk; it became clear to her that he would drink himself into a certain state as he wrote, then decide he needed to see the attic and to see her. He needed her to be there in the attic. They needed each other.

Story after story would pour out; they were horrible and they were vivid. Even she could read that on his lips and hear the sharp ends of certain words, words reserved for killing and for agony.

Then he would collapse, his head on the table. Asleep.

It took some time for her to realize that what he had been doing in all those visits was repeating stories he had just written only hours earlier. She had become his sounding-board. He was greedily demanding of her that she listen

to what he had written, even though he knew she could not understand fully what he related.

It was then she wanted to scream at him in hatred for using her. Or scream in pain for the discomfort. Or punish him for his dictatorial use of her spirit; he had ignored her eyes, her lips, her smile, her cheeks, her forehead, her neck, her breasts, her soft hands, her long legs, her swaying walk, her very breath and her mute but happy smile. And worse, her natural perfume of love.

Still, he became her passion. She admitted it now to herself. She needed those rare and wonderful evenings. She was like a vine, linked to his crises. She didn't mind his drunkenness. She needed his hand to twist hers. She needed him to talk and talk. The more confused the stories the longer he stayed, the longer he charmed her and loved her through the rhythm of his talk.

Rumors began. Other apartment-dwellers had seen him going to her. "What a strange love affair," they said. "He's an author. She's a mute. But you must admit, she is a pretty young thing." "How do they do it? I mean, how do they make arrangements? One's dumb, the other's crazy!"

And so it went on. Until: "Will they marry?"

Women whispered. Men chuckled. Both with envy.

She would have loved to know what they were saying, but of course she had no idea. She would have forgiven them. Sadly, none of it was true.

She knew she was nothing to Kien. He mistook her first for a jungle girl named Hoa, then for Phuong, the girl next door. Then for the invalid Hien on the train. Then, horribly, for a naked girl at Saigon airport on 30 April 1975.

He also mistook her for certain ghosts. At times he wasn't aware she was even female, for he changed her name often from masculine to feminine.

Even so, he was irresistible. She had deliberately waited for him one night, somehow knowing he would be relatively sober. He had arrived, smiling, and swung himself into the seat, just a little tipsy. He was a bit shy, but he seemed at home. He seemed to be saying to her that this was the night she should be talking. He even asked if she could speak to him. She shook her head "No!"

He continued to speak, as though it had been a polite question he had not wanted answered.

"This is the last of the novel," he said clearly.

"Now," he said, equally clearly, "I don't know what to do with the mountain of papers." He meant his novel. Now that he had written it he had no use for it. Whatever devils he had needed to rid himself of had gone. The novel was the ash from this exorcism of devils.

Kien had written for the sake of writing, not to publish.

He looked over the room, then out of the window. She watched his hands, then his eyes, then his lips as they softly formed poetry in tune with his magical glances as he described his latest story.

She leaned over. Slowly, gently, she kissed him.

Their first kiss.

He seemed unaware. He changed the subject, telling a story of his father's studio. This one, here. Now.

"I don't know what to do with all these papers," he said.

This awakened her. She leaned over and kissed him again. This awakened him. He gently pushed her back on the bed. But his eyes were a little crazed and for a moment she expected a beating or some retribution.

He lifted from her and left. She could hear his footsteps on the stairs as he returned to his apartment.

He did not return for some days. She waited for him with painful anxiety, but he did not come.

One night she decided she would visit him. There was another blackout, which gave her the cover of darkness to move around. She tiptoed downstairs and peered through the partly opened door; it was never locked, anyway. She could see him by the light of a kerosene lamp. The smells of alcohol and kerosene mixed in the air.

She thought she heard him groan as he wrote. He seemed obsessed and definitely didn't feel her presence. She stood by the door like that for a long time. From then on during every blackout she came down and watched him. His hair grew longer, his face grew more haggard. He looked older. Surely the writing had to end; yet she did not want it to end, fearing the end would have other consequences for her.

After some weeks, on another blackout night, she had returned later than usual and stopped to peer in on her way upstairs. Kien was kneeling by his stove shoving torn paper into it and lighting and relighting it.

She silently closed the door behind her and softly walked over and kneeled beside him. She recalled the story of the frenzied destruction of his father's paintings; she placed her hand over his, to stop him putting another page into the fire.

At first he looked startled to see her there. But he stopped the burning, letting the fire go cold. He turned and took her in his arms, away from the stove. In the total silence he then possessed her as though nothing else in the world mattered. She gasped in desperation for him and for many hours they remained locked together. His loneliness pierced her like a knife, throbbing painfully.

He left while she was still asleep. Somehow she knew she would never see him again. This was his final departure.

She understood he had left his apartment for her. He had left the door wide open and a chilling wind had blown through, disturbing the papers and carrying many of them into the hall and down the stairs. She gathered them all together, tidied his room, and took the manuscript to her own attic.

None of the pages were numbered. There was no obvious order to them and she was able to understand only a very little of it. But she knew she had to keep them.

Months went by. Then a year. The manuscript gathered dust; it looked like an elegant old parchment.

Hanoi. Now Kien writes only at night because only then can he hope to write that which is truly his own. He drinks to stay awake, yet his recall is clear and he is more alert than ever. By night he is more creative, tapping his imagination, his poetic streak, and gathering in the plot of the story more easily.

His street neighbors are now more accustomed to his eccentricity in burning the night-lights, despite their ghostlike quality in the gloom.

Professional burglars and prostitutes in the lake area soon got to know about him. The Ha Le lake is their circuit, so they have nicknamed Kien's room the Ha Le lighthouse. They greet him: "How's the Ha Le lighthouse keeper these days? Get plenty of writing done last night?"

He returns a smile to them when he opens his window in the morning to welcome the dawn breeze. A little farther down the street a famous "pavement girl" wolf-whistles up to greet him and make fun of him.

At night, when all around him grows dim, Kien feels closer to life. It seems that darkness truly reflects the darkness of his soul. Now sleepless nights have become normal for him. Unless he is very drunk he never sleeps before early morning. The nights have become more precious and urgent to him. By day, he sleeps, an unnatural, dry, and uncomfortable sleep. And if he does doze off at night it is only briefly, for time jolts him out of his sleep with a fiery reminder to his soul.

There are times when he feels that only death will give him a real rest. In his childhood he heard the saying: One's life is only a handspan; he who sleeps too much shortens it by half. Kien realizes his time is running out. He is not afraid of death; there is nothing about it that frightens him. But he is sorrowful, and heavy with regret for tasks unfinished.

Once, in slumber around daybreak, he had the vivid impression he was leaving life. The images and the exalted feeling he experienced were so clear and deep that he wondered if he could ever feel the same when he really came to depart this earth. Kien felt he had died right then; however briefly, he had died. In that one-thousandth of a second something inside him that was normally so blurred, so unclear, froze and became sharp and cold and visible. He seemed to have inside him a deep slash into which his life force was draining, pouring from him slowly, silently, yet irrevocably. His vital force flowed from him as from a broken pot, and Kien fainted away.

It was a little death. Kien knew it as his head dropped to his desk, as his pen fell from his hand and rolled on the floor. It was not like the times he had been shot, or when he had fallen victim to a fever and been unconscious. Nor was it anything mystical. It was a new experience which had overcome him. It was the truth of all truths, the rule of all rules, the very last point of life. It was death. He recognized it.

He saw his life as a river with himself standing unsteadily at the peak of a tall hill, silently watching his life ebb from him, saying farewell to himself. The flow of his life focused and refocused and each moment of that stream was recalled, each event, each memory was a drop of water in his nameless, ageless river.

Kien saw the Chu Van An school as it had been back then, in April 1965, just before the outbreak of war. It was a late spring afternoon. By then its shady row of trees had been chopped down, its yard crisscrossed with deep trenches, anticipating war. The headmaster, wearing a fireman's helmet, boasted loudly that the Americans would be blown away in this war, but we wouldn't. "The imperialist is a paper tiger," he screamed. "You will be the young angels of our revolution, you will rescue mankind!"

He pointed to a pupil among the tenth-form boys who were holding wooden rifles, spears, spades, and hoes, showing childish bravado. "Life is here, death is also here," the boy said and the others sang noisily. Someone yelled, "Kill the invader!" and everyone cheered.

But Phuong and Kien were not at the school meeting held to preach the Three Golden Rules of Preparedness. They had escaped and had hidden behind the Octagon building on the shore of the West Lake. From where they sat, under a tree on the lake's edge, they could see the Co Ngu road, tinted red by the setting sun, and the flame trees in brilliant bloom. Cicadas sang loudly, continuously.

"Don't worry," Phuong said smiling, delighted she had skipped classes with Kien and also dodged trench-digging duties. She had worn her skimpy swimsuit under her school uniform, right there in the school, as if for a dare. "Forget about the war and all the heroes, young and old heroes. Let's swim over to the Water Palace, far enough out to be dangerous..."

What a beautiful, warm and sweet April day it was. The delirious hugs together in the light green water. The fish brushing by them, the lily pads. Phuong's beautiful face suffused with water, the bubbles from her underwater breathing, her hair waving, heavy with water, her shoulders, her lovely long legs. All was so intimate, so perfect, that it made him ache.

The distant sound of a choir in the schoolyard reached them.

"Don't worry," Phuong said as they listened. She kneeled behind a shrub

and removed her blouse. When she emerged she had on a lovely black swimsuit with a plunging neckline. The clarity of her pale skin contrasted beautifully with the black suit.

Kien, already nervous, was breathless. He hardly dared look at her lovely body.

As they swam the sound of the choir again reached them, the twilight deepened, and they got farther and farther from the bank. He recalled this had been the last peaceful stretch in the river of his life; ahead of him from that moment on there was a long new stretch of river, full of fire.

War.